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JUNE '45

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TRAIL OF THE WES

A NEW NOVEL BY RICHARD H

Get after Infectious Dandruff with LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC NOW!

Quick Germicidal Action Kills the "Bottle Bacillus" by millions, and Helps to Restore Scalp to Normal Condition.

If there's a telltale shower of excess flakes and scales when you comb your hair . . . take heed!

They can be evidence that a case of infectious dandruff is getting started and may be well on its way.

This is no time for "over-night" remedies that have no germ-killing power. The emergency calls for real germicidal action and massage—right now!

K... "Bottle Bacillus"

Start ... th Listerine Antiseptic twi... tment which has ... which ... ent

the germs themselves. Kills literally millions of the threatening "bottle bacillus" before they can multiply further. Meantime those nasty flakes and scales that distress you so begin to disappear, and that painful itching is quickly relieved. Your scalp glows and tingles with a new feeling of health. Your hair feels wonderfully fresh. The treatment is as simple and easy as it is delightful.

You simply douse full strength Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp and follow with vigorous, rotary, fingertip massage for several minutes. Thousands who are not troubled with infectious dandruff use Listerine Antiseptic as a precaution against it, making it a part of their usual hair-washing.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

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WOMEN: Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic. **MEN:** Douse full strength Listerine on the scalp morning and night. Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage. Listerine is the same antiseptic that has been famous for more than 60 years in the field of oral hygiene.

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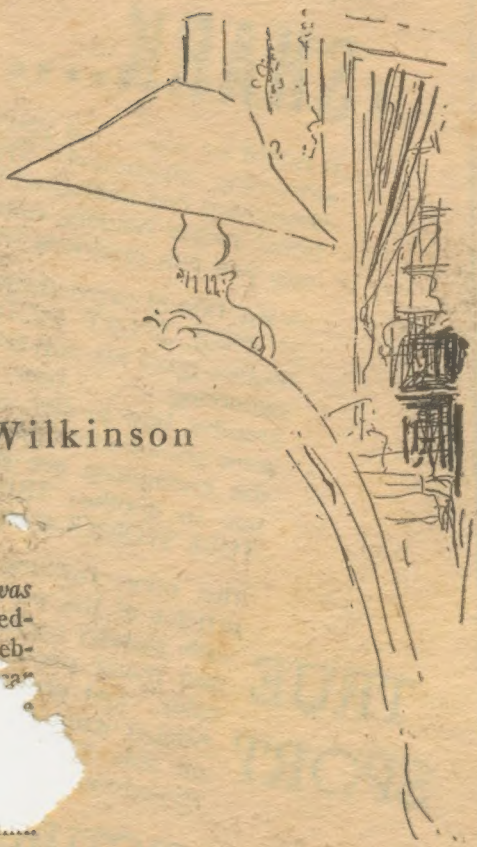
AUGUST ISSUE — 10c A

Miss Adria Webster's introduction to the West was a startling one—startling and sinister.

TRAIL OF THE WESTERN SUN

by Richard Hill Wilkinson



A Four-part Novel—Part I

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face. ...proud...
He t... cigarette case, carefully selected a smoke and lighted it, smiling at her through the blue cloud. She knew the signs. Something had happened, some-

thing important. In a minute he would tell her what it was, but now he had to go through the elaborate business of creating an atmosphere of casualness.

"So you don't like the West," he began with a forced smile. "Well, I can't say that I blame you much. It's pretty drab, uninteresting and desolate. I should have known better than to suggest that you come with me in the first place."

"My!" Adria eyed her father closely. "How you do change, Mr. Webster. Just this morning you were trying to sell me the idea of what a grand and glorious country it was. Let me see." Her eyes twinkled mischievously. "What were some of those picturesque phrases you used ? Oh, yes! Quote. Where a man can breathe in God's free air and feel alive. Unquote. Quote. Where earth and sky meet in distances too great for human comprehension. Unquote. Quote. We're lucky to be Americans, to be part of this vast empire that is our rightful heritage. Unquote." Adria paused and laughed merrily. "I was really impressed, dad. I never suspected such poetic thoughts could originate in that practical mind of yours. Now, what's happened to bring about the great change?"

Thomas Webster cleared his throat noisily. His face took on an austere look, then he grinned.

"I guess I'll never learn that the roundabout approach doesn't work with you, Adria. The fact is, I'm worried. Mort Seymour boarded the train at Harding. I've been talking to him in the club car."

"Mort Seymour?"

"He's to be my assistant. The valley people hired him for me." A smile touched Thomas Webster's lips. "He's a regular old-timer, complete with big hat, high-heeled boots and six-shooter. When I mentioned that I had my daughter along, he was at first annoyed and then gravely concerned."

"Why should he be?"

"According to the stories he tells, this Antelope Valley country where we're going is pretty rugged and wild."

"Indian raids and outlaws and that sort of thing, I suppose." Adria's eyes were twinkling again, but this time Thomas Webster didn't smile.

"Seymour was serious, Adria. There have been two killings there within the past week. It seems that a man named Phineas Ogden is objecting to the construction of the railroad."

"Can one man's objections be so important?"

"Apparently Ogden's can. He's the largest cattle raiser within miles. Has been for years. His outfit, the Tomahawk, is located nearest the railhead at Redhawk. The other ranchers who ship from Redhawk are located at the far north end of the valley. All of them are small, and it is Ogden's intention to keep them small."

"Why? It sounds like a case of pure greed and selfishness."

"It is. Being nearest to the railroad, Ogden doesn't have to trail herd his beef for any great dis-

tance. When his cattle arrive at Redhawk, they are sleek and fat. Cattle coming down from the valley's north end have to be penned up and fed for a couple of weeks in order to put the beef back on them that was lost on the trail. Naturally, this is expensive."

"I see." Adria frowned, aware of the unfairness of the situation and faintly resentful. "So Mr. Ogden doesn't want the railroad built to the north end of the valley because that would mean that the smaller ranchers could meet his competition."

"Precisely. There are six of these smaller outfits. A year ago a young man named Dave Buckman organized them, raised enough money to impress the banks at Albuquerque, made a trip to the State capitol and secured a franchise for a spur line railroad to be run up into the valley. The ranchers swamped out the road bed themselves, cut and hauled timber for ties and for a bridge across Skull Canyon. It was an energetic undertaking. According to Seymour, it could never have been accomplished without Dave Buckman."

"It seems to be Ogden against Buckman. Is Buckman a large ranch owner, too?"

"On the contrary, he's the smallest of the lot and consequently has less to lose than the others. According to Mort, he has certain ideals that he feels are more important, chief among them being the right of free enterprise. Frankly, I can't help but admire the man."

"He sounds interesting. Still, his attitude could be just plain stubbornness."

"Perhaps." There was a curious expression on Thomas Webster's face. "I've a notion that Dave Buckman is an unusual type of man. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it was the respect and deference in Mort Seymour's voice whenever he mentioned him. Seymour himself is nobody's fool, yet his attitude toward this Dave Buckman was one almost of reverence."

Adria's impulse was to laugh, but, somehow, she had the feeling that her father wouldn't appreicate levity at this moment. The realization astonished her. Thomas Webster wasn't the type of man who was easily awed or impressed by second-hand stories he heard of other men's greatness. Too often, personal contact betrayed the fact that the greatness was false, a veneer beneath which were ordinary human traits and characteristics.

Three years ago, the name of Thomas Webster had been prominent among the leading construction engineers of the country. It was still prominent, but now, with the business reverses of the 1921 slump sweeping the country, construction was practically at a standstill.

Of a naturally active temperament, Webster had found idleness intolerable. Under ordinary circumstances, he would not have considered the Antelope Valley job. A twenty-five-mile railroad which included a single hundred-foot bridge was nothing to excite his in-

terest. Coming at the exact moment it did, the offer to supervise even so small a project was eagerly seized upon.

The money involved was the smallest consideration. What appealed to him most was the chance to work, to keep his mind and body alert and active until the time general business conditions improved. Moreover, the very name "Antelope Valley" appealed to his imagination. The job offered an opportunity to visit a section of America which he had always wanted to see.

It was for this reason that he suggested that Adria come along. Adria was now almost twenty-one. She had finished school and come home to the Fifth Avenue house to live. If the truth were known, the girl presented a problem that had caused Thomas Webster more than one sleepless night.

Since her mother's death when she was twelve, Adria had spent the greater part of her time in school. For three years she studied abroad in Paris. Every summer during those formative years, they went to New Hampshire where Thomas Webster had a small summer place. There were usually one or two school-girl friends along, and always Ada Webster, Thomas' maiden sister, had been present to keep an eye on the girls.

But now school was over. Immediately afterward, there had been a trip abroad. In September, Adria returned to live with her father. She was a tall girl, cool, composed and matured. Her hair was honey-colored, as her mother's had been, and she had her mother's blue eyes, too. In fact, as far as Thomas Webster could see, there was little about this beautiful creature that reminded him of himself.

What struck him chiefly about the girl was an air of boredom that she seemed to wear like a cloak. She betrayed little interest in anything. The young men who came to call and took her to dances, parties and theaters were all smooth-talking, polished, self-possessed youths who seemed as bored with life as Adria.

At first, Webster watched with some concern for signs of an attachment between his daughter and one of these smooth young men. Though it was unlikely that he would have interfered, he secretly hoped that she would find nothing more than a superficial interest in the youths.

He need not have worried. Adria treated them all the same. Her attitude toward them remained casual and aloof. She was pleasant and agreeable, but it ended there.

Puzzled at first by Adria's obvious boredom, Webster at last faced the thing and admitted that he was to blame. He had allowed his daughter too much freedom, given her too many advantages. She had never had to work for anything. She had moved in a moneyed, ultra-sophisticated circle. She had gone everywhere and seen everything that was the habit of rich young women of the day, and like the other rich young women, she was, at the age of twenty-one, in the unfortunate position of finding little left in life to interest her.

It was a deplorable situation, and it worried Thomas Webster to a point of desperation. Eager to make amends for his mistake, he was vastly relieved when Adria agreed to accompany him on his trip West. She betrayed the first glimmering of excitement over the prospect that he had seen.

Exactly what Webster hoped to accomplish by bringing his daughter West, he himself did not know. He knew only that the life there would be new and different. He had vague hopes that it would offer an answer to his problem and to Adria's problem, too.

But now those hopes had been dashed by Mort Seymour. No matter how urgent he felt the need of exposing his daughter to a new and different kind of environment, he could not expose her to physical danger.

Much of what Mort Seymour had told him he had withheld. He hoped to accomplish his purpose of securing her promise to return at once to New York, without going into details of the more barbaric aspect of the Antelope Valley country as pictured by Seymour.

Which, of course, was conclusive evidence of Webster's lack of knowledge and understanding concerning his daughter's true character.

"The minute we reach Redhawk," Webster was saying, "I shall make arrangements for your return trip. I understand there is a hotel of sorts in the town. It will be necessary for you to remain there overnight, but I'm sure you won't mind such a brief inconvenience."

Adria looked at her father for a long time before replying. As on many previous occasions, she felt a sensation rising in her that was closely akin to pity. Pity tempered with wonder. He was so kind, this handsome father of hers, so kind, thoughtful and eager to make her happy, and so completely lacking in understanding.

This knowledge had at first saddened her. She had made what she believed were attempts to reach a common ground of understanding, had failed miserably, and so had resigned herself to a condition that existed without either of them wanting it to.

They were devoted to each other. Each respected the other in his own particular way, but they had lived apart too long to reach a point of close communion. It was tragic, yet seemingly inescapable. Adria had hoped more than she ever had hoped for anything in life that this trip West, because it would involve living close to her father and close to his work, would accomplish what living with him in the huge Fifth Avenue house had failed to do.

And now, because he had taken seriously a few wild West stories told to him by a man who obviously liked to create drama by the sound of his own voice, he was urging her to return to New York. What had started out to be a highly profitable experiment for them both, was going to end in failure before it started.

She had believed that her father wanted, needed her with him. She

had been wrong. The thought left her cold and empty-feeling.

"That's ridiculous, dad. Now that I've come this far, I will not consider returning under any conditions." Her expression revealed none of the bleakness she felt. The same mischievous twinkle was still in her eyes. Behind that look was the dreaded thought of having to return to New York. To what? To loneliness, boredom and a sense of complete inadequacy. No, somehow she would find herself here in this new land. She would find herself and find understanding with her father.

Thomas Webster looked annoyed. "I'm sure you don't mean that, Adria. You're saying it because you do not understand the seriousness of the situation. Mort Seymour was not being dramatic. He was stating facts."

"I'm saying it because I am completely and wholly intrigued by the picture your Mr. Seymour has painted of this Antelope Valley. It sounds adventurous and exciting. It appeals to my imagination."

"Nonsense!" Thomas Webster crushed out his cigarette with a gesture of annoyance. What had started out to be a pleasant conversation was rapidly developing into an argument. Webster hated arguments; they betrayed a weakness of character. He was determined to end this one as quickly as possible.

"You're making it very difficult for me, Adria. Common sense must tell you that I am only doing this for your own good." He looked at her squarely. "I cannot assume the responsibility of keeping you here with me."

"Then I shall remain on my own responsibility. I'm not a child, dad. I . . . I've managed for some time without this responsibility to which you've suddenly decided to attach so much importance."

It was a cruel and unkind thing to say. The moment the words were spoken, Adria wished them back. She could see the hurt look come into her father's eyes. And the wretched thought occurred to her that now, as before, instead of reaching an understanding, they were drawing farther and farther apart.

Yet the words had been spoken. They hung there between them like a tangible something, and Adria could not find the strength within herself to recall them.

Thomas Webster said stiffly, "I'm sorry that you have adopted such an attitude, Adria. I'm quite aware that you are not a child. It is unfortunate that you are forcing me to treat you as one. I attempted to approach this on a friendly basis by explaining my reasons for asking you to return. I am no longer asking, I am demanding."

There was a finality in his tone. He looked away, and Adria turned to stare through the compartment window. Bleak despair was in her heart. She had only wanted to be of help, to be needed, and he had interpreted her attitude as that of a stubborn child.

The train was slowing for Redhawk. The country outside was bare and desolate-looking, desert

Adria whirled around, her eyes terror-stricken. 'A man stood on the threshold, a man with a face that was handsome and reckless, in which lay a hidden, secret strength.

country stretching away to distant hazy hills.

A porter knocked on the door of the compartment and began removing their baggage. An urgency swept through the girl. Somehow, she would find a way to defy her father. She would not return to New York. She would remain here. It was as though she knew, without putting the thought into words or definite form, that here lay her destiny, here lay her last hope of finding something in life that she had been seeking without knowing its nature, knowing only that it would give her fulfillment and ultimate happiness.

She was aware suddenly of a new voice in the compartment. She turned her head and saw a tall, heavy-set man standing in the compartment doorway. He wore a black mustache and the costume of a cowboy that she had seen pictured in magazines and had not quite believed.

If she had had an impulse to laugh, that impulse died immediately. She found herself staring into the keenest pair of brown eyes that she ever had seen. Behind the intenseness of the look was a dignity and a gentleness that at once gave the man a character and a personality that demanded respect.

She inclined her head slightly in response to her father's formal introduction. A sudden, shocking thought was rushing through her mind. This man, this Mort Seymour, had not been dreaming up wild, fantastic stories for her father's entertainment. He had been speaking simple truths for her father's and for her own protection. She knew, by merely looking at him, that he was not the type of man who would be given to idle story telling.

And on the heels of this realization came another. If what Mort Seymour had said about the country and the conditions that existed there were true, then his description of Dave Buckman was also true.

Clearly, vividly, she remembered the things her father had said about Buckman. At the time of the telling, she had pictured a wild West type of hero who enjoyed making a spectacle of himself because of the applause he received, but with no definite purpose behind his play-acting.

Now she knew that Dave Buckman, Phineas Ogden and all the other inhabitants of Antelope Valley were real people with a definite, even desperate purpose in life, that everything about this country was vital, real and important.

A strange thing happened then. A sensation came over Adria that, under any other circumstances, she would have laughed at. It was a sensation of kinship, of being drawn to a man whom she had never met. It was as though the spirit and strength of Dave Buckman were reaching out to her, giving her the assurance she needed, offering her a solution to her problem that was as yet unnamed.

The feeling was so strong that her heart unexplainably stepped up its beat. She felt a strange lifting of her spirits. When she turned again to face her father, she was actually smiling.

Thomas Webster saw the smile and felt relief move through him. He rose, reaching into his pocket for a tip for the porter.

"I've explained things to Adria," he said casually to Mort Seymour. "She's agreed that it will be best for all concerned if she returns to New York in the morning."

Adria felt Mort Seymour's eyes upon her and met the look steadily.

"A pity you had to make the trip for nothing, Miss Webster. Perhaps when things quiet down you can pay us a real visit."

"I don't think so." She was smiling, but her eyes were without mirth. "I've learned a lot about this country within the past hour, Mr. Seymour. That probably surprises you. Frankly, it surprises me." She paused. "I envy you, Mr. Seymour. You and all the others who are sharing in the business of quieting down this country to make it safe for unimportant people like me to visit."

II.

Adria had formed no clear picture in her mind of Redhawk. Its diminutive size was somewhat of a shock.

There were a total of seven buildings, huddled together and bisected by an unpaved, rutted street. Beyond the huddle, to the north, a number of unpainted shacks dotted the landscape.

Close by the depot were the loading pens. They covered an area that was more than equal to that of the town. They extended along the railroad siding almost as far as the eye could reach. Even to one as inexperienced as Adria, it was obvious that several thousand head of cattle could be penned up here at a time.

It was late afternoon when the *Transcontinental* deposited its three passengers at the tiny depot. No one was on hand to greet them, no vehicle, horse-drawn or otherwise, was drawn up behind the structure. The shipping pens were deserted. There was not a soul in sight anywhere.

Following Mort Seymour toward the group of buildings, Adria had a feeling of desertion and forlornness. It was like being in a ghost town. The windows of the seven buildings were dark, gaping, sightless eyes.

Seymour stopped before a building over the door of which a crudely painted sign was tacked. It read, "Emma's Hotel." It was a dirty, weather-stained affair, one story high, completely exposed to the mercy of the hot New Mexico sun.

The room into which they stepped was dark and deserted. Mort Seymour dropped their baggage to the floor with a thud and called, "Emma!"

There was movement in the back part of the house. A door opened and a woman shuffled out. She was old and as dirty as the place in which she lived. She stopped short at sight of Adria and shot an inquiring gaze at Seymour.

"Miss Webster is returning to New York on the morning train," Seymour explained briefly. "Have you the rooms ready?"

The old lady shrugged and shuf-

fled across the floor toward another door. The room into which Adria was shown was scarcely big enough to accommodate the chipped iron bed, the chair, bureau and washstand with which it was furnished.

The two men left her there without apology and she could hear them entering another room across the hall. She sat down, looked around her and wondered why she didn't feel resentful and disgusted.

The sun had disappeared and the street outside was in shadow. She rose, went to the window and looked out. To the left, diagonally across the street, lights had sprung up in one of the town's other buildings. She could see that it was a saloon. A lone horse stood with drooping head outside the place.

Adria turned back into the room and poured water from a cracked pitcher into the bowl. She washed herself gingerly, dried her face with cleansing tissue and then got out her make-up kit. And all the while the thought was running through her mind that somehow, some way, she would have to find a means of defying her father by not getting aboard the New York train tomorrow morning.

She no longer analyzed the resolve. It was just there in the back of her mind. Again and again her thoughts went out to Dave Buckman. It was almost as though she knew the man, had known him for years. It was as though there were a secret communion between them and that she was merely waiting for him to come to her.

She rose and paced back and forth in the narrow confines of her room. Reason and common sense kept nagging at her, telling her how ridiculous this notion was. Buckman was probably miles away. He could not possibly know that she was even in Redhawk. And if he did, what possible reason would he have for coming to her?

Yet the notion that he was coming, that he would somehow solve her problem quite as though it were in the natural course of events, persisted. She could not rid herself of it.

Darkness was complete and she had lighted the oil lamp on her bureau when her father knocked on her door.

"Dinner time," he said, trying to make his voice sound jovial. He found it easy to smile now, easy because he was convinced that Adria was not only willing but, after her first glimpse of Redhawk, eager to be on her way back home. He regretted the sharp words that they had spoken on the train and wished vaguely that there were something he could do to make amends. "There was a question in my mind about dressing for dinner," he remarked gravely. "I decided against it because I reasoned that the folks here might think we were trying to appear snobbish."

She smiled at his attempt at humor and followed him out through the hotel lobby. Mort Seymour was waiting for them outside the door.

"The food isn't as bad at the Jackpot as the appearance of the place might indicate," he told them, and

then added, forgetting that Adria was not going to accompany them up into the valley. "Please don't judge the entire country by the accommodations that are offered here. Things are much better farther north."

Thomas Webster made no reply, and Seymour, realizing his mistake, lapsed into silence. They crossed the street to the lighted building that Adria had observed from her bedroom, and entered it through a side door.

The restaurant was partitioned off from the main part of the saloon and was reasonably clean. There were only three tables, none of which were occupied. A surly-looking individual in apron and shirt sleeves took their order. He spoke to Seymour, but completely ignored the Websters.

They were halfway through their meal when there was a commotion beyond the partition. Footsteps thudded on the saloon floor, and muffled voices could be heard.

Mort Seymour lifted his head, listened a minute and announced briefly, "The boys are coming in."

"What boys?" Adria asked abruptly.

"Some of the ranchers from the upper valley," Seymour explained. "We're having a meeting in town here tonight. I want them to meet your father and explain things so he'll know exactly what he's up against."

"Will Dave Buckman be at the meeting?" Adria asked, keeping her voice carefully casual.

"Hope so." Seymour nodded. "Yes, Dave will be here. Couldn't do much without him." He turned to her suddenly and she could feel the intenseness of his eyes. "How did you happen to know about Dave?"

"Dad told me. He pictured him as a rather colorful figure." Strangely, her heart was pounding. "I suspect that dad was overdoing it a bit."

"Possibly." Seymour chewed his steak thoughtfully, and suddenly the corners of his eyes crinkled. "I wonder what Dave would think if he knew he'd been described as a colorful figure?"

"If he's human he would probably feel flattered." And she added, with the interest of a hero-worshiping girl in her tone, "I'd like to meet this Dave Buckman very much."

"So would a lot of other people." Seymour's expression was suddenly grim. "Dave doesn't show himself around town much, ma'am. It would be dangerous for him to do so. You see, he's a pretty important man. If Phin Ogden could get him out of the way— Shucks!" He broke off abruptly, his tone apologetic. "I'm making it sound a heap worse than it actually is. If I keep on talking this way, I'll have your father scared away, and we need him as much as we need Dave."

"That thought occurred to me, too," Adria said. "If this Dave Buckman's life is in danger, then dad's is also in danger. It seems to me unfair—"

"Nonsense!" Thomas Webster pushed back his chair and rose.

"Come on. Let's get back to the hotel. All this talk is unnecessary."

"It doesn't seem unnecessary to me," Adria rushed on desperately. "It seems to me that it would be less dangerous for me to go up into Antelope Valley than any of you. I'm probably the least menace that this Phineas Ogden could think of. And if dad's in danger I want—"

"Adria!" The sharpness had returned to Webster's tone. "The thing is settled and we'll not discuss it further." He gave Mort Seymour a look. "Mort, suppose we postpone any more discussion of the situation here until we have our meeting?"

Color rose into Seymour's cheeks. Adria had the feeling that he had merely wanted to be agreeable and realized his error even more keenly than her father. She felt a sense of indignation at them both, and yet helplessness was more poignant than any other emotion.

Back in her room, Adria did not light the oil lamp. She lay down on the hard bed fully clothed and stared out into the darkness.

She felt alone, deserted and unwanted. A tear trembled on her eyelid and coursed down her cheek. She dashed it angrily aside. Beyond her door, she could hear the low murmur of her father's and Mort Seymour's voices.

A new fear was striking at her heart now. Her father was in danger. Until that moment in the restaurant, when Mort Seymour had inadvertently awakened her to the realization, the thought had not taken form in her mind. Now she knew that it was so, and she had a sudden longing to be near him, to help if it were possible for her to help.

Mentally, she could see the gap of misunderstanding widening between them. Now, no matter what she might say or do, her father would think her only purpose was to defy his wishes by remaining here in Redhawk.

She heard sudden movement in the room across the hall. A door opened and closed. She waited, tense, but no one knocked on her door. She heard only the retreating footsteps of the men as they moved down the hall.

She rose silently and crept to the window. Lights glowed from other buildings now. The street was faintly illuminated.

Two horsemen jogged past the hotel and pulled up in front of the Jackpot. After they had disappeared inside, a shadow detached itself from the darkness directly across the way and moved into the street.

Adria saw her father and Mort Seymour join this man. For a moment, the trio stood there in the faint light, talking, then as sounds of another horseman came from the north end of the town, they turned and hurried away.

For a moment, the street was deserted. Then a single horseman came into view. He was keeping close to the buildings opposite the Jackpot, was a mere moving shadow in the dusk. Adria saw that he sat tall and straight in his saddle.

and yet she sensed that there was an air of furtiveness about him.

When he was almost at the corner of the hotel, the rider stopped, blended into the shadows. If Adria had not been following the course of his progress, she would not have known that he was there. She had the feeling that he was staring across at the Jackpot, waiting, strained forward in his saddle.

From off in the darkness behind the hotel, she heard a low whistle. It was repeated twice. The shadow at the corner of the hotel moved and was gone. Faintly, she could hear the sound of retreating hoofbeats.

Adria sat down on the edge of her bed. She was trembling without knowing why. She sat straight and rigid and her hands were clenched tightly in her lap.

Something was terribly wrong. This silent town, with its shadowy figures, was unreal and unbelievable. The air was charged with a feeling of impending disaster.

Sudden, violent sound erupted in the Jackpot Saloon. Adria sprang up and ran to the window. As she reached it, the batwing doors of the saloon burst open. Men came tumbling out. Behind them were others.

Shots filled the air. The lights in the saloon suddenly vanished. Blue and orange streaks of flame that were gun flashes became pin-points in the night.

A man, a shadowy figure, began running across the street, zigzagging. There was a sudden fusillade of shots. The running man stumbled, fell, pitched headlong into the dust. His body jerked convulsively once, and then was still.

Involuntarily, Adria screamed. Sight of the dead man lying out there in the street horrified, sickened her. She wanted to turn away, yet something held her there, watching in terrified fascination.

The group of men who had first come from the saloon were across the street now, hidden from view behind one of the buildings. Gradually, the firing tapered off. There was only an occasional shot. Then silence, utter and complete, settled over the town. There was not a light anywhere. It was like living in a tomb.

Adria's mind began playing tricks on her. She fancied she heard footsteps just outside her window. She imagined whisperings and low chuckles. She thought she glimpsed shadows flitting about.

It was a hideous, terrifying sensation. Trembling violently, she returned to the bed and sat down. She considered lighting her own lamp, but shuddered at the thought of this beacon of light attracting a dozen pairs of prying eyes. She thought of calling out to the hotel proprietor, Emma, but mere memory of the old lady's wrinkled, witchlike face gave her a sinister feeling.

Away off in the hills, a coyote howled. Its mate answered from some distant pinnacle. It was hard to believe that this was civilization, that there were buildings near, people. The feeling of remoteness, of aloneness, was overpowering.

She groped toward the bureau for a match, determined at least to drive away the darkness in this room, to

give herself the small comfort of light despite what effect it might have.

Her fingers had closed over the box of matches when it happened.

From somewhere up the street there came the sound of a shot. It was followed by another and then a fusillade.

A man yelled and kept on yelling. Hoofbeats pounded in the night. Horsemen flashed along the street outside. Adria saw the blue-white flashes of gunfire. She heard bullets singing and whining through the air.

A light appeared in the Jackpot Saloon and instantly vanished. She heard the swinging doors creak, followed by sound of running feet.

Terrified, she stood at the window, listening to the continued sound of shooting, seeing shadowy figures darting in and out of buildings.

The cry of men's voices rose louder and louder on the night air. And now she realized that the voices were yelling in rhythm, as though a group of men were heaving or pushing in unison.

Momentarily, the ratle and crash of gunfire diminished. There was a loud reverberating thud, followed by a crashing, splintering sound. The yelling rose to a higher pitch, the sound of shots increased to a steady roar.

A pale glow was suddenly reflected against the sky. It grew brighter and brighter, and now the wide-eyed girl could hear the crackle and roar of flames.

A rush of sound started at the far end of the street and drew rapidly closer. Adria drew back from the window. Horsemen were galloping toward the center of the town. Behind them came other riders. Guns roared and bullets whined as the running gun fight continued to a point directly in front of the Jackpot.

Here the retreating group flung themselves from their saddles and made a stand. They disappeared as if by magic into doorways, behind piles of boxes, around corners of buildings. The second group of riders were checked in their headlong pursuit.

Before the girl's horrified eyes, she saw a man throw his hands high into the air, heard his anguished scream of pain and watched him plunge headlong into the dust.

The street was lighted in a weird, ghastly glow now. The burning building was much nearer than Adria had at first thought. She could see flames leaping up into the sky not a hundred yards away.

Then she heard a sound apart from the rest that struck a new terror to her heart. Someone was pounding on the door of the hotel. A moment later, she heard the flimsy barricade crash inward. Footsteps sounded on the plain pine floors—footsteps that came rapidly along the hallway toward the door to her own room.

In that instant, the paralysis that had held the girl left her. She fled across the room and reached fumblingly for the key to her door. And, suddenly, she was sick with fear and

dread. There was no key, nothing at all to protect her against intrusion from whoever it was outside.

With a whimpering cry, she turned back to the bureau, thinking to drag it across the floor to barricade the door.

Her hands had barely closed about the corners of the bureau when the door behind her was flung open. With a gasp she whirled, flattening herself against the bureau, her eyes wide and terror-stricken.

A man stood on the threshold to her room. He was so tall that the crown of his hat brushed the casement above. Firelight from outside played across his features. She saw a face of fierce emotions, of courage and reckless. It was a face in which lay a hidden, secret strength. It was a face of fierce emotions, of courage and bravery. It was a face in which you would instinctively put your confidence and your trust without question.

It was a face that burned itself into Adria's mind, creating a picture that she would never forget.

The man stood there for a split second without speaking, his dark, intense eyes searching the room, and finally coming to rest upon her where she stood in the shadows against the bureau.

He spoke then, briefly, wasting no words, coming to the point with cruel abruptness:

"Miss Webster, ma'am, I'm Dave Buckman. Your father and Mort Seymour have been shot. Come with me, please. At once. There is no time to lose. Your own life is in danger."

TO BE CONTINUED.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

CONJURE

A sheaf of straw-flowers used to hang
  Just inside grandma's attic door,
Heads down, stems up, to dry. A tang
  Upon the autumn air, the floor
Was dull beneath with pollen dust.
  Bright petal suns of orange and rust—
  Oh, do they hang there any more?

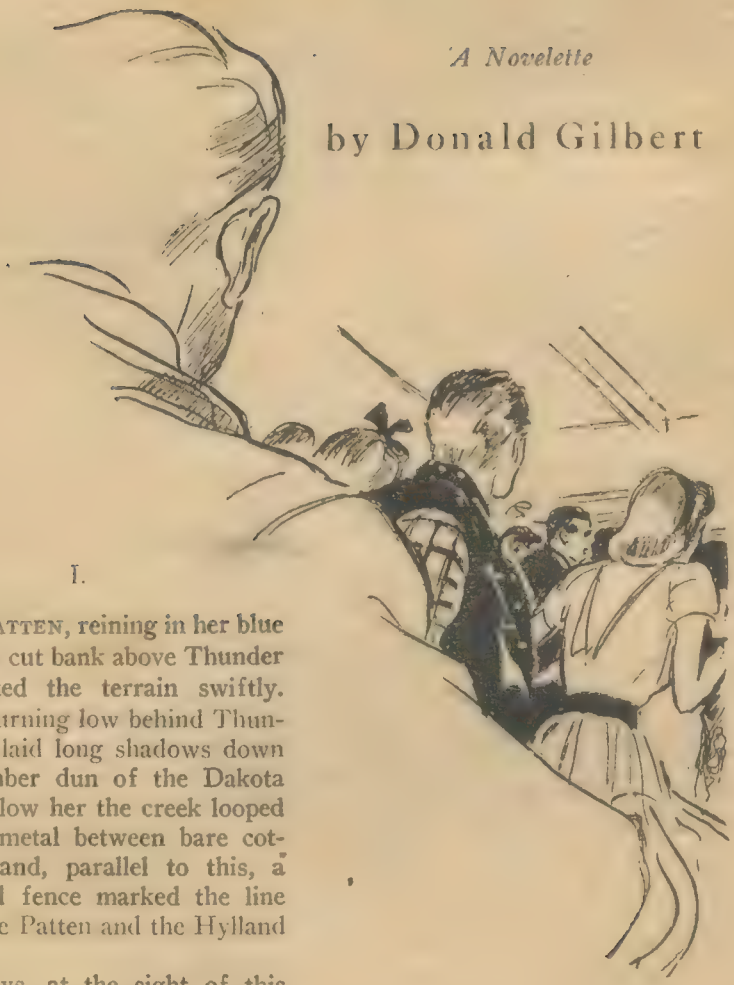
Does anybody ever raise
  A straggling weedy-looking plot
Of summer bloom for winter days?
  How many years since I forgot—
Until this roadside with the white
  Wraiths of straw-flowers, and the night
  Haunted by their sweet bouquets.

DOROTHY MARIE DAVIS.

BOSS OF

A Novelette

by Donald Gilbert



I.

MEDA PATTEN, reining in her blue roan on the cut bank above Thunder Creek, noted the terrain swiftly. The sun, burning low behind Thunder Butte, laid long shadows down the November dun of the Dakota valley. Below her the creek looped burnished metal between bare cottonwoods and, parallel to this, a four-strand fence marked the line between the Patten and the Hylland ranches.

As always, at the sight of this fence, hot resentment flared in Meda. Her father, old Sam Patten, had forced that fence and Meda sympathized with his reason.

THUNDER BUTTE

The Hylland ranch, folks said darkly, wasn't up to no good now that its owner was back home.

The Hylland ranch should have belonged to him. It was the best ranch in the county, had Thunder Creek running its entire length, while the Patten range depended for water on storage dams. Jim and Nancy Hylland had gone head over heels in debt to buy that land when they found old Sam was dickering for a fair price. And to what purpose? Through the years they had frittered away their precious purchase, barely meeting payments, but successfully holding it from a man who would have fully developed it.

Jim and Nancy Hylland had died leaving young West, their son, to finish the process of disintegration. Two years ago, West suddenly quit the ranch, sold his cattle and went to work in a coastal war plant.

Yet even in defeat, Meda knew, West ran true to form. Rather than let her father buy his ranch, he kept up small payments and rented the range to despised sheepherders.

Now his name was a byword in Thunder Butte County where the Patten clan ruled. He had proved a traitor to his heritage, a man of the open country debilitated by the wealth of cities. And to think that for a brief time she had believed she loved him!

Meda's cheeks, still a warm tan from the summer sun, burned with shame while her deep-gray eyes and softly pointed chin took on hardness. Inexperience had been her only excuse for love!

Memory boiled about her as she saw the creek crossing where it had happened. She had been riding home from Chance, the county seat, when the skirts of a summer storm brushed her. Far up valley, it broke in fury against the buttes. Because of the danger of a flash flood, she took a short cut to the creek. Water was already high when she reached there, but not dangerously so. Then halfway across the ford, she glanced upstream to see a wall of foam and débris roaring down on her. Simultaneously, there was a shout behind her. She looked that way to see West Hylland and his top hand, Tag Dulane, galloping madly along the bank. Even as her horse floundered, she felt West's lariat about her.

When she came to, she was lying on the ground with West bending above her, smoothing back the smoky blackness of her hair. Through the fringe of her lashes, she saw the sky was a clean-washed blue. A blue that was dimmed by the burning intensity of West's eyes. Always before she had thought his eyes remote, like his father's. Now they held all the ardor that made his mother's memory unforgettable.

"Meda"—his voice quivered with tenderness—"Meda!"

She tried to control the answering tremble that shook her.

"I sent Tag for whiskey and blankets." His voice broke deep in his chest. "I . . . I was scared to move you."

She knew what was going to happen then and did not try to resist. His firm lips came gently down on the scarlet of her mouth in a long kiss.

"I love you," he whispered against her cheek.

She clung to him, her fingers caught in the brown gilt of his hair, her heartbeats like the galloping of wild horses.

"It's time we ended the feud between the Pattens and the Hyllands," he said softly. "We'll go to your pa together."

"I can tell him best alone," she murmured, her mind whirling.

In the end it had been that way. Her father took the news quietly. His cavernous gray eyes and hawk features were unreadable, yet gentle, and she trusted him.

"Don't you think we better let this ride awhile, daughter?" he asked. "I don't want to lose my little girl when she's still so young. Anyway, I just got word from your sister Helen that she needs you a couple months. Bill and her are having a baby. When you get back from Rapid we'll see how things stack up. I'm sending Rod down with a truckload of steers tomorrow and you're to ride with him."

The prospect of Helen's baby was exciting, yet new enchantment whispered she couldn't leave. Besides, she didn't want to make the trip with Rod Maxine, her father's foreman. Rod frightened her a little, even though her father trusted him. Rod was lithe and dark and made her think of a wild cat stalking his prey. But she went to Rapid, leaving a message for West. Day after day she waited for an answer. None came. Then she was home again and West was gone.

"Tag Dulane and he tried to enlist," her father told her. "They took Tag in the air service, but West couldn't get by. Color blind." His arm came protectively about her slender shoulders. "I'm glad it happened this way, daughter. I wouldn't have wanted him to make you leave your country."

"No one could make me do that!" she cried, and the vast sweep of the valley gave her strength to mean those words.

She suddenly saw that her father had always been right about the Hyllands. Jim's quiet ways had merely been sneaky. Nancy's laughter, which overshadowed even the memory of Meda's mother, had only held the empty gaiety of a flirt. And West, square-jawed, silent, his blue eyes remote or meltingly tender, was a combination of the two, a trifler!

"I'm glad you love your land," her father said. "I hope you choose a man who feels the same way, someone like Rod."

He looked down into her level eyes and, abruptly, she knew his wish. He wanted her to marry Rod. He had been planning on that all along. So had Rod. That was what had frightened her about him.

"I don't love Rod," she answered simply.

"By now you should have learned love isn't everything," her father said. "Rod is a fine man. Don't make him wait too long."

Meda stopped thinking of the past and, with a set chin, she urged her mount down the fence line. Although this was not their end, she would never wittingly allow Patten

stock to trespass on Hylland property.

On a flat where a side road entered the Hylland ranch and the Patten fence veered away at right angles, Meda found where tumbleweeds had piled against the wires and broken them with wind force.

Ground-hitching her horse, she took tools from the saddlebag and started repair work. It was dusk by the time she finished and, as she tested the wires, car lights swept over a hill and poured toward her. The car stopped before the wire gate and a man stepped to the road. In the headlight's beam, she saw that it was West Hylland.

He dropped the gate to one side, vaulted the fence and came striding to her.

"Hello, Meda," he said, holding out his hand while his voice remained a controlled blank. "I was sure it was you."

"I never recognized you," she denied, wanting desperately to make him realize how little he or a past kiss meant to her. "The city always changes its people."

"The city hasn't changed me," he said steadily, "and I'm not one of its people. It's better to be back here than I ever dreamed."

The even pressure of his fingers burned through her veins like fire and she pulled her hand away with bitter haste.

"Back? You're coming back to stay?"

"Yes. I've paid for my ranch. Some of the sheep now grazing here belong to me. I'm bringing in others. Choice Merinos. I'm ready to start over and fight if necessary."

She accepted the challenge of his words with flashing eyes.

"It's like a Hylland to bring more sheep into cattle country!"

He laughed shortly. "I'll admit it isn't often a cattleman turns to sheep, but this is a free country and sheep are a good bet. I'll see they bother no one. All I ask is to be left alone."

"You'll be left alone!"

"I had hoped the Patten-Hylland feud might have been forgotten, that we might be friends," he said, and the boyish note of disappointment in his voice tore at her. "Guess I should have known better. At any rate, let me offer congratulations now that I have the chance."

"Congratulations?"

"For Rod and you."

"There is no need yet!" Of course, he had heard the gossip.

"I'm sorry to be hasty."

Now he was laughing at her. She turned away haughtily.

"There's someone in the car I'd like you to meet," he told her quickly.

She stooped to gather her horse's reins.

"It's Tag Dulane's widow. Tag was shot down over the Pacific."

Those words held a cold finality that stopped her short. She turned and moved beside him to the car.

"Lissa," West said, "this is Meda Patten, our nearest neighbor."

With a lithe movement, the girl slipped from the seat. Her left hand found West's possessively, and yet like a child's seeking assurance. Meda was conscious of a shock that

Tag, the clean-cut, should have chosen a wife like the girl in the fox jacket. She was slender, blond, pretty in an over made-up way, and her violet eyes were filled with worldly wisdom.

"Tag told me about you," she said in a throaty voice that held a curious antagonism.

"I'm sorry about Tag."

Meda knew her words and handclasp were stiff and unfriendly. She was glad to be back on her horse, headed for home. Over and over, she asked herself what Tag could have seen in Lissa. Or what West now saw in her. A shoddy prettiness, the mere fact she was a woman—

And the girl evidently distrusted her because of something Tag had said. Not that it mattered!

On a high hill Meda glanced back, choked by a confused mixture of childish hurt, loneliness and fierce pride. Far across the valley lights from West's car brushed the Hylland ranchhouse. West was home again. The native had returned and yet he was more an outsider than if he had remained away!

The news of West's return spread like wildfire around the country. Because of the hostility between old Sam and the Hyllands, because old Sam was patriarch of the clan and the Pattens ruled Thunder Butte County, the neighbors turned to him for judgment.

As usual, old Sam was poker-faced when his rheumatism allowed him to ride his tall black about the countryside. When he spoke, he knew his words molded opinion and yet there seemed to be no malice in the quiet of his face.

"Yes, West Hylland's back, but I guess he don't figure on being one of us. Bringing in more sheep and the ways of the city. That woman. Even if she is Tag Dulane's widow, and Tag was his best friend, she still isn't our kind."

The clan and its satellites agreed. Not so much about the sheep as about Lissa. Sheep were no longer news to the ranchers, while a girl like Lissa was. West had hired a Russian woman to stay at the ranch and do the cooking, still— People began to recall all sorts of rumors that had trickled back about Tag's wife. Tag had found her singing in a San Francisco water-front cabaret. Next day he had married her. What he had seen in the girl's shallow prettiness, no one knew. What she had seen in him was easy to guess. The allotment received by a soldier's wife would be enough to tempt a girl of her type. Why she had come with West was another question. She wasn't the kind to take to a lonely ranch life. She must be in love with West. He was really very attractive in a hard-jawed, silent way. They would likely be married after the conventional period of widowhood.

Meda heard all these rumors, accepting and rejecting. She distrusted Lissa and despised West. Pride was a branding iron that seared her as she remembered how deeply the pressure of his lips had stirred her. Now he was flaunting this girl before her eyes! Yet she

had another kind of pride that forced her to fairness against all slurring remarks.

"Why are people so willing to condemn?" she cried. "No one really knows Lissa. She looks like a child to me."

"Not half the child you are," old Sam said fondly.

"Well, I think more of West for befriending her!" Meda flashed. "It shows how much he cared for Tag."

She saw color staining Rod's olive cheeks. He was jealous, and he had no right to be. She hadn't promised anything yet, no matter what her father wanted.

"I don't care," she said defiantly. "I admire West's honesty. When he does a thing, he just does it no matter what people think."

Rod's black eyes went hard as obsidian while his face took on a cold blankness that made her shiver.

Old Sam bridged the uncomfortable silence with his gruff voice. "Saw a string of posts washed out of the line fence over in the Sink the other day. Was going to fix them myself, but this damned rheumatism come on again. Guess you'll have to tend to it, Rod. I won't have Hylland's cursed woollies pollutin' my range!"

"I'll see to it this afternoon," Rod said shortly.

Meda was abruptly sorry that she had even unintentionally hurt him. With no help to be hired, Rod was doing the work of three men for her father, better than many a son.

"I'll ride over and lend a hand as soon as I can," she volunteered.

The quick flash of his smile held a sudden intimacy that left her tingling.

The Sink covered an area of five hundred acres on the north side of the Patten and Hylland ranches. It was a wild place of badlands and deep arroyos filled with ash and buffalo berry, making a perfect haunt for coyotes and an occasional wolf.

It was midafternoon when Meda joined Rod. She hadn't thought of herself as attractive in Levis, scuffed leather jacket, battered Stetson and stout gloves, yet Rod's appreciative glance put color in her cheeks. Working beside him, she suddenly knew a deeper sense of comradeship for him than she ever had felt before. It was as if she were just discovering the worth her father had long known to be in this man. They spoke in quiet monosyllables and Meda never knew how long it was before a far but insistent bleating wore in on her consciousness.

"Sounds like a sheep in distress," she said, pausing to listen.

"Likely a stray," Rod answered. "Hylland's sheep went through here to the west meadow when I first came."

Meda had a deep sense of responsibility toward all animals. "That sheep is more than lost," she said. "It's hurt!"

"Could be." Rod shrugged. "I don't think that herder Hylland has is much good."

Meda stood it as long as she could, then dropped her tools to the ground. "I'm going to find out what's the trouble."

Meda topped the hill and slammed on the brakes. A half-buried spot of darkness that she knew must be Lissa lay just ahead. She finally got the young girl into the car and started back through the snow for the ranchhouse.

"Likely a broken leg or coyotes after it," Rod said. "I'll go along." He got his rifle from the saddle scabbard, and the two of them went down into the breaks. The bleating was hard to locate, but finally they came to a deep wash thick grown with slender ash. At the head of this, they found the sheep. It was an old ewe securely bound to a bowed sapling.

"What in the world does it mean, Rod?" Meda asked.

He pushed past her, his face grim. "It's a wolf snare with a live sheep as bait. I've heard of them, but never saw one before."

"Who would set such a thing?" she asked, the pitiful bleating of the frightened animal going through her brain in waves of horror.

"It's on West Hylland's land," Rod answered shortly, "and I'd say his herder was too dumb."

"Cut it loose!" she cried between clenched teeth.

Rod hesitated. "A man has a right to defend his property the way he sees fit. Likely, West saw this as the easiest way. The life of one old ewe against the slaughter a single cunning wolf can do likely didn't seem like much."

She reached for her knife, but he shook his head. His own knife flashed and the taut sapling swished back into place. The ewe lay panting on the ground, still too terrified to move.

Meda leaned against a tree, complete disillusionment going through her in waves. Rod was beside her in a moment, his arms strong and comforting.

"My darling, I wish this might not have happened!"

She sought his strength, her slender figure suddenly shaken with sobs. His sinewy fingers cupped her chin, forcing her brimming eyes to meet his.

"Meda, don't make me wait any longer! Forget West Hylland and marry me. I swear you'll never regret it!"

"I despise West Hylland!" The words were torn from her in a shuddering sigh. "I'll marry you any time you want!"

His lips came down on hers in a long kiss that left her broken and clinging to him.

"We'll be married at Christmas then," he whispered jubilantly. "Next week at the bazaar dance, we'll ask all the neighbors!"

II.

Darkness came early the night of the bazaar dance, the sky sullen with the threat of snow. Despite great plans for personally announcing his daughter's impending marriage, old Sam had to give them up at the last minute when he was taken by a fresh siege of rheumatism. However, he gave implicit instructions concerning the wedding invitations which were to be countrywide.

"And take my car," he instructed Rod. "There's weight enough there to buck the drifts that may be here before morning."

Rod drove silently, both Meda and he permeated by excitement. Chance blazed with lights, the streets crowded and parking space already

limited. The front of the two-story auditorium, where the dance was being held, was festooned with colored lights. Upstairs, the hall pulsated with gay music and the hum of hundreds of voices.

Meda and Rod knew everyone there and were beset by friendly greetings. She was the daughter of old Sam, and Rod was old Sam's head man. Rod was not long in spreading the blanket invitation and the word of the Patten-Maxine engagement flew across town as quickly as if announced by a loudspeaker. Immediately, the dance took on even greater gaiety, like a scherzo of music before the climax.

Then Meda saw Lissa and West. They were dancing together. She caught the flash of West's eyes, remote and calm. Lissa was laughing up at him, her pale-gold hair swinging loose to the shoulders of her yellow dress.

Meda's throat contracted as her partner swung her. She hadn't believed the raw hurt West once had inflicted in her heart could return, yet, by some freak of emotion goaded by music, it was back! She laughed feverishly, flirting her gray eyes behind their dark lashes, tossing the smoke of her black curls, moving gracefully in the slim cocoon of her scarlet dress. She swung from partner to partner, from congratulation to congratulation, knowing Rod's eyes followed her jealously, possessively, and it meant nothing. She knew Rod had been drinking too much and she didn't care.

Lights dimmed to a blue dusk and the music melted to a moonlight waltz. She knew Rod was looking for her and turned to meet him as a quiet voice above her said, "This is our dance, Meda."

Caught unawares and dazed by emotion, Meda could not resist West Hylland's arms. Beyond a roaring in her ears was only a whispering silence filled with the song of violins. Even when he whirled her out of the open back door and onto the porchlike fire escape, there were no words. In the close darkness his lips found hers in a long kiss. She closed her eyes while snowflakes brushed her upturned face.

"Meda! Meda"—West's voice was a strangled whisper—"there is no use my pretending or denying. No matter what has gone, no matter what comes, it will always be you. You must understand that!"

Her heart knew the dagger of agony. "And Lissa—"

"You don't understand about Lissa."

"Yes, I do. You're trifling with her just as you once did with me!"

"Trifled with you?"

Anger released her from the spell of the moment, and against the closed lids of her eyes, she saw the live ewe used as snare bait. Thrusting against him with all her might she cried bitterly, "I found that wolf snare you set. I made Rod cut the old ewe loose. Perhaps you were even using Lissa in the same way, as live bait!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" he cried.

"You know!" She struck him a stinging blow across the mouth.

In the same instant, lights flashed on in the hall. Meda heard an angry exclamation behind her and whirled to see Rod in the doorway.

He called West an ugly name and West backed away as Rod moved cat-quick toward him.

"Sam Patten's right about you Hyllands," Rod said thickly. "You're all sneaks! Laying hands on my girl while that cheap little water-front woman waits inside for you!"

Meda saw the murderous fury that blazed in West's eyes at that insult. He loomed suddenly motionless in the falling snow and his voice was like rasped steel.

"You and all the Patten hangers-on! Judging someone else, pretending virtue and superiority, turning on a kid who hasn't got a home, who never had a chance. Cowards, all of you!"

Rod lunged at him and the sound of their blows was dull in the night. Suddenly, it was very still, with the snow quickly covering the red spatters on the floor's whiteness and only the movement of hard bodies shaking the fire escape. Then it was over. West's right found Rod's chin with a stunning crack and Rod went backward through the wooden railing with a splintering crash. A woman screamed shrilly and, in the darkness below, Rod's body thudded against the frozen ground.

Meda heard someone shout as bedlam broke loose, "Hylland insulted old Sam's girl. Rod caught him—Rod slipped in the snow!"

Lights and voices rushed into the dark alley. A Patten hand cried, "Rod's done in. We'll lynch that Hylland upstart!" Another voice commanded, "Quiet! Don't start that. Get Rod to the doc. This'll be in the law's hands!"

Through the falling snow West's eyes pleaded. "Meda, I didn't want it to happen this way. I guess it was a crazy way to say 'good-by'!"

"You couldn't help it," she said scornfully. "You wouldn't be able to understand. You're not one of us, not really a native!"

She brushed past reassuring hands as the sheriff hurried toward her, pompous but agitated.

"Miss Patten, this is terrible. I'll do my duty at once!"

"That's all anyone could ask," Meda answered shortly. She pushed through the tightly packed throng as Lissa suddenly appeared and flung herself in West's arms.

"Go to the hotel, kid," she heard West say, "and get yourself a room. Don't be scared."

"But, West, what will they do with you?"

"Don't worry about me. Do as I say."

He went quietly with the sheriff and Lissa was left alone. Dazedly, she looked about her for a friendly face. She was a stranger in a hostile world and West's words had not reassured her. Clutching her fox jacket about her, she hurried out of the hall.

Meda forgot Lissa in the emergency of the moment. She was a Patten and one of her father's men had been hurt. It was her duty to see that he received proper care. For the moment she forgot Rod was

anything more to her than just a hired hand.

In Doc Gilford's office, Rod was still unconscious although he stirred restlessly. In an aside the doctor told her. "Superficial bruises from his fall. He's more drunk than anything else."

At the hotel, seeing to last details before going to her own room, Meda bent above Rod. The smell of liquor on his breath repulsed her yet he was muttering. She caught the sense of jumbled words, "Meda mustn't know—wolf snare a trick—make her hate West."

She stepped back from the bed, her lips a thin line. She was not surprised and more disgusted than angry. Rod's jealous trick had been so shoddy and unnecessary. She would have to have a frank talk with him, make him understand that complete honesty was the only basis on which she could marry him. There must never be another trick!

The knowledge of Rod's duplicity about West made her think of Lissa and she went down to the lobby. Lissa had not registered.

Meda's heart knew unbounded pity for wounded creatures, and Lissa was suddenly just that. The girl needed protection from a hostile world. It came to Meda that she and all the neighbors had unwittingly violated the unwritten code of Western friendliness.

With these thoughts, she went outside. The storm had settled into a steady fall of snow, but the wind had not yet risen. Hurrying along the street, Meda vainly searched for West's car. Evidently Lissa had taken it. Why, Meda did not know unless the girl had some foolish idea of going to see that West's sheep were taken care of. Being city bred, she could have no idea of her danger.

Satisfied in her conclusions, Meda found the Patten car and headed home. Outside of town, the car lights discovered tire tracks still unfilled with snow. Meda increased her speed as much as she dared. Driving on the narrow road was a nerve-torturing job. She knew about how long an inexperienced driver could last, yet she was halfway home before she discovered the expected. West's car lay on its side in the ditch. But Lissa wasn't in it, and her tracks led on in the snow. A new respect for the city girl touched Meda, yet there was also a new necessity to hurry. Lissa might easily wander from the road and out onto the prairie.

The trail was suddenly obliterated and when the car lights picked it up again, a flurry of wind slowed Meda's speed. Then she topped a hill and slammed on the brakes. A half-buried spot of darkness lay just ahead.

Always afterward Meda was glad Lissa was so small. She got her in the back seat with little trouble. She prayed for speed until her car lights sprayed the Patten ranchhouse. Yellow lamp glow filled the living room windows and the front door opened to release old Sam's bellow. "Meda, Rod, is that you?"

With her father hobbling ahead of her, Meda managed to get Lissa

to the davenport in front of the fieldstone fireplace. Lissa twisted, muttering broken words:

"—must get Sam Patten. They'll hang West if Rod dies. Sam Patten stop them—all his fault."

So it was love and fear for West that had driven Lissa to brave the storm, Meda thought—that and the belief that some fault lay at the Patten door. Meda shot her father a piercing look. The old man's hawk face was defiant yet questioning. Meda answered that question by a brief account of what had happened.

"I don't know what the devil the girl's raving about!" old Sam blustered.

As if in answer to this, Lissa's eyes opened. She didn't act surprised and was evidently long past any fright.

"You'll go?" she whispered. "You'll make them understand?"

"Nonsense," old Sam growled, but Meda caught a note of uncertainty in his voice. "Your precious West is safe enough in jail!"

"He isn't mine," Lissa said faintly. "He's Meda's forever and ever. Just as I am Tag's by the child that will be born. West has been good to me. He loved Tag and understood how it was between us."

Meda's mind was a stampede of seething questions.

"You'll go to him?" Lissa asked old Sam again.

"No," he roared. "I'll never lift a finger to help a Hylland!"

Lissa was very still and white. "Meda, you loved West once—you still do. I saw it in your eyes that first evening. I didn't trust you then, but it comes to me now that there must be things you don't know or even your Patten pride could not hold out against that love. Tag told me these things, so I know they are true!"

"Be quiet," old Sam cried, but his voice lacked strength.

Lissa looked at him and her scornful eyes silenced him.

"I know why you hate the Hyllands, Sam Patten. You hate them because Nancy Mordan jilted you to marry Jim Hylland. You loved her and your stubborn pride was hurt. You married another woman to spite her, but you couldn't forget. Then you haggled over the price to a coveted piece of land and, while you haggled, Jim and Nancy bought it. They didn't even know you were dealing for it until later. After that, you tried your best to ruin them and nearly succeeded because you were boss of Thunder Butte County. You carried the feud on and tried to ruin West. You thought you had West cornered because he was so young. Then Meda and he discovered they loved each other. You sent Meda away, thinking to control the situation. When Rod got back from Rapid, he knew what to do. He went to West and told him Meda and he were engaged, that Meda had merely been indulging in a schoolgirl whim—"

So it had been another of Rod's tricks. The first but not the last. There was no hate, no anger in Meda's heart for Rod. Only a great, terrible blankness.

"Then West never got my note?" she whispered.

"Tag said he never had a word from you. What Rod told him was all he heard. He couldn't give up his ranch and yet he couldn't stay and see you marry Rod. He tried to enlist. When that failed, he went to work to pay for his ranch. He never forgot you, but he believed he had gained the strength to hide his feelings. He decided to come back and go into the sheep business. Tag came home on leave before he finished his plans. It was only a month after Tag had gone back to the Pacific when I got the telegram from Washington. By that time I knew about the baby. West said I must come with him, that this would be a good place to raise a child, better than the city."

Before Meda's burning eyes, her father's face turned a shamed crimson.

"You're safe now," Meda said to the girl. "There is no need for my father going to West because I am going to him!"

There was a moment's silence broken only by Lissa's soft sobbing and the crackle of the fire. Then old Sam cleared his throat. He was a good poker player and he knew a royal flush when he saw one.

"I'll take care of Lissa while you're away, daughter."

Meda accepted this in the spirit it was given. At the outside door, she paused and turned back to Lissa. Kneeling beside the girl, she put her arms around her.

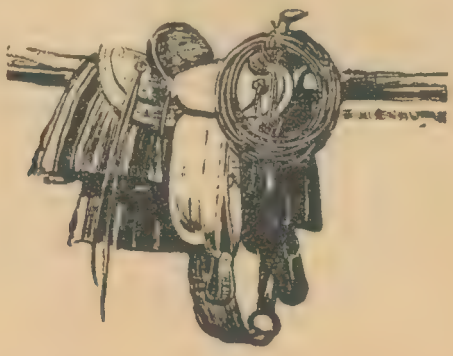
"You'll stay with West and me from now on!" she whispered.

Glory dawned in the brimming violet eyes.

"Somehow, I was sure West couldn't be wrong in his love for you," Lissa murmured. "He's such a right guy!"

Blindly, but with a high singing in her heart, Meda hurried out into the storm. Was it fifteen or fifteen hundred miles to West? Distance or time made no difference. She was going to her man, to the native returned!

THE END.



SOME CALL IT LOCO WEED

by Jeanne Ceres Wing

When it comes to gettin' fooled by ***loco weed,*** *some hombres ain't much smarter than old range ponies.*

"THERE'S the man for me." They saw him swing wide the batwing doors as though he needed plenty of room to get through as, indeed, he did. He was a big man with a shock of unruly, chestnut hair which made him seem even taller. There were red glints in his brown eyes and the glints became exploding star shells when he saw Lucy behind the bar. He stalked over and towered above her.

"So this is the saloon that's been taken over by a girl! I might have known. My luck couldn't have been anything else. Girls have been the bane of my existence ever since I was shoved off my mother's lap to make room for twin sisters."

Glory! Wasn't he beautifully angry? "Beautifully" was the word, too. Lucy never had seen anyone so downright handsome nor so black-mad as this one.

"What'll you take," he continued, "to go out that back door and not come back for fifteen minutes?"

"There'll be no shooting in my place, so I'm staying right here," Lucy said firmly, knowing exactly why he wanted her out of the way. Because of those two young renegades at a rear table. A good thing, too, that they were out of earshot or this good-looking young lawman wouldn't have lasted this long.

"For half a plugged peso, I'd pack you out of here and give you

"I reckon they aren't dead, are they?" Lucy asked, looking up questioningly at the men who were surrounding her.

a right smart paddling besides," blazed the young man. "Know who I am?"

"Reckon not, but I don't see you wearing any license that says you can throw a girl out of her own place of business, mister." Lucy straightened to five-feet-two and looked him in the eyes, her own defiant.

"I'm Win Storrer, the new ranger, recently mustered out of the army."

"Well, I'm Lucy Nolan, the new saloonkeeper here."

Win groaned. "If you'd just listen to reason— But redheads never do. You're in my way. Those two hombres back there are wanted for murder. They know I won't shoot it out with them because of you. This is a chance I've wanted for weeks and now I lose it, all because a feminine scrap of loco weed blew across their trail. You haven't the brains, apparently, to realize that this saloon is no place for a lady."

The red-gold braids on Lucy's shoulders fairly snapped. "Apparently, I'm not a lady because I'm a saloonkeeper and a good one. When I asked my uncle to set up my brother in business after he came out of the government hospital, he said he had a business that needed attending to before Terry came out, and that I could run it meanwhile. He took this saloon on a bad debt. Well, I'm on the job."

"And I'm likely to lose mine," Win said grimly.

"Oh, no, I'll help you," Lucy decided sweetly.

"You will? How? For half—" He paused, choking with anger.

"Half a plugged peso," Lucy prompted. "Dear me, I must get in some plugged pesos. Excuse me now, please, while I see what my customers want."

The two men at the rear table were watching the argument, grinning. They couldn't hear what was being said, but they knew that the girl bartender and the stranger were having a royal battle.

They were two tough young hombres all right, Lucy knew. One was a handsome Mexican, the other a dark-haired Texan. They were thinking that this pretty girl, like all girls, favored their slim, swaggering good looks instead of the big stranger. Lucy could read most of this in their smug smiles as she walked down the long room toward them. She didn't know why they were here. She had fairly shaken in her huaraches when they had entered a half-hour before, because she had seen their pictured faces tacked up in the post office, with rewards posted underneath.

However, they had merely bought a bottle of her best whiskey and were drinking it and talking in low tones when Win came in.

"It's all right, boys, he's leaving," she said, adding with a crinkly, saucy smile, "he says he's sure you're bad 'uns, that I'm not to talk to you. The nerve of the likes of him, telling me what I can and can't do in my own place. Suppose

you are bad 'uns? I've had such in my place before. It's no place for a girl, says he. Pooh! I'm sick of regulations about this and that. Pay him no never mind. We'll have a drink together out of my own uncle's private bottle, and the back of my hand to the likes of him."

"That's the stuff!" declared the Texan. "He's no good for a place like this. I'll bet he's a lawman, and a lawman hanging around can sure kill a business like this. Keep the law out and we'll see that you build up the biggest saloon business on the border."

"Oh, grand! That's what I want. I'll let no lawman ruin my business. Now I'll go get uncle's pet bottle and we'll all drink to the destroying of lawmen. Then you can help me plan how to get rid of this one."

"We've got that figured out, miss, and we know a nice spot to bury him. There might be a mite of quicksand in it, but that'll hustle him on down to the hot place where he belongs," promised the Texan.

Lucy's blood chilled even more, but she looked down so that they couldn't read the terror in her blue eyes. All they saw was the sun stealing through the slats of the batwing doors, to run a golden finger over her bright-tipped lashes. Her mouth was sweet with laughter, a wide, crimson mouth kissed by Irish dimples at the corners. When the sun reached her red-gold hair, hanging in two braids on the shoulders of her blue print gown, the men blinked and looked at each other. Amazing to find so much beauty behind the bar of a border saloon!

"Listen, miss, you leave the drinking to men. Men don't like their womenfolks' breath all messed up with whiskey and we're your menfolks from here on. I'm Pecos and he's Dobé."

"I'm Lucy." Lucy held out her hand to each. "Well, you boys can drink to our better acquaintance. I'll be right back." Lucy hurried to the bar and drew out a dusty bottle from under it.

She shivered at the look of black anger on the young ranger's face, but flipped her hand at him in a gay gesture as she fairly danced back to the rear table.

She poured a generous drink of the mellow old whiskey into each glass and the young men got to their feet and saluted her as they drank.

As they sat down again, Win pounded on the bar with his glass, and she shrugged, gave the men a wink and went back to wait on the lawman.

"I can't see why I ever wasted a minute on you. I must have been loco not to see beneath that beautiful hair to the toughness of you," Win raged. "Once and for all, will you get out of here before you stop a bullet?"

"No, did you think I would?" Lucy asked saucily. "Oh, look out!" as an angry bellow came from the rear table.

She flung herself at Win from around the end of the bar, the surprise of her attack taking him off

his feet onto the floor where she held him down firmly, strong young arms around his neck.

The renegades were wobbling to their feet and hauling at their guns with hands which would not obey the orders of their brains.

Win struggled to free himself from Lucy's arms, but she had the strength of terrified desperation and, a second later, two thuds came heavily and the renegades measured their lengths on the floor.

Win freed himself of Lucy's strangling hold and leaped to his feet. "What the devil—" he began, and cleared the space in nothing flat to snap bracelets on both unconscious outlaws.

Lucy came to her knees, but her legs wouldn't support her, so she knelt there at the end of the bar, her blue peasant skirt giving her the effect of a morning glory flower with a golden-red heart.

"I . . . I reckon they aren't dead, are they?" she asked weakly.

Win's deputies rushed inside, evidently taking the shouting for a signal, and between them they carried out the unconscious men.

"Now, young woman, just what did you give them?"

"Knock-out drops," she said reluctantly. "I c-couldn't have bl-blood all over my clean fl-floor."

Win put back his head and roared with laughter. "Al-always the p-perfect l-lady," he mimicked. "Where'd you learn to dope drinks?"

"That's part of my training," Lucy said, managing at last to get to her feet. "An old friend saloonkeeper said never be too much of a lady to hand men what they asked for, if they were going to be tough. He fixed up that bottle of whiskey for me with just not enough to kill anyone. I would have had a drink with them—I offered to," she added, and hid her shiver under a shrug.

"You'd have backed down if they'd wanted you to," Win said sarcastically. "I've met your sort of angel-faced girls before. Well, you get the reward offered for those two bad hombres' capture."

"Oh, I don't want it! Please don't tell anyone what I did. Some of their friends might harm me."

"But I don't want the reward," Win grumbled.

"Then give it to one of the veterans' hospitals," Lucy said. "They can always use money. Only don't ever let Pecos or Dobé get away. It would be just too bad for me."

"Yes, I reckon it would be, but a tough kid like you could talk herself out of any mess."

"I'm not tough," Lucy denied, glad to find that she could reach the high stool behind the bar without showing her weakness.

"Not tough!" Win fairly snorted. "I never saw a girl come any tougher, cold-bloodedly handing out doped drinks with a smile like an angel's and a black heart."

The doors behind them swung open and a tall girl with glorious ash-blond hair swinging on her shoulders, peeked in. "Win, how you talk! I couldn't wait any

longer and the men said you were alone in here so it was all right for me to come in."

So that was the kind of girl Win admired, Lucy thought, looking at the smart creamy buckskin riding clothes.

"Stay out, Felicia. This is no place for a lady. I'm coming right away. So long, miss." Win hurried the black-eyed blonde outside, as though Lucy's presence might contaminate her.

Only then did Lucy bury her face in her hands and cry. She felt sickened by the memory of what she had had to do and what it had earned her. Not even a "thank-you" from the lawman, just his contempt.

She knew who the girl was. Felicia was the daughter of the sheriff who had been killed by one or both of the two men now prisoners. Lucy had heard other talk, too, which set her mouth into grim lines and brought her head up to an angry tilt.

The batwing doors began swinging inward as excited men came in to talk over the latest excitement.

"I knew what we needed was a ranger that lived hereabouts," one of them said. "He's floored those renegades so flat they've had to call Doc Ryan. How'd he do it, miss? You musta seen it all."

"They expected him to shoot it out, but he's an ex-service man, maybe one of the commandos—he didn't say," Lucy told them glibly. "Is he good with judo! That's what the commandos use in wars, you know, an improvement on the Jap way of wrestling." Lucy made explanatory motions with her arms and fists. "Honestly, it all happened so fast, you'll have to ask him just what he did."

"Say, wish we'd been here. Of course, he couldn't use guns in the same room as you."

Lucy made the proper answers, but there was a hurt within her that seemed to grow and grow. Win hadn't even tried to understand her position. After all, those two renegades had shot the sheriff down far more mercilessly than she had doped their drinks.

She tried not to remember the moment when her arms had been around his neck, her face pressed to his warm brown throat. Felicia Burns looked to be everything that he expected in a girl, low-voiced, beautifully turned out and a perfect lady.

The old sheriff had been wise in the ways of border renegades and yet he had lost his life. What chance had a new, untried lawman? That was why Lucy had handled the situation the way she had.

When you ran a border saloon, you had to be ready for tough 'uns. She hated the job she had to do. Her uncle had suggested it as a test for her, she knew. Probably he never had thought she'd take the place over. Well, she had, and she'd earned the business for Terry, who'd be well enough to run it himself in another month, and Terry was a fighting Irishman. They'd live over the saloon in the rooms the other man had fixed up.

Now she stayed in the home of the local doctor and his wife.

Lucy was tired enough to drop when Win came in late that evening. For the moment, she was alone at the bar, her customers filling the tables down the room. Win was scowling and her heart sank. What had she done now?

"That was a fine yarn you made up about how I caught Dobé and Pecos," he grumbled. "I wouldn't have let it stand, but Doc Ryan said I'd better. If those birds had friends and it was noised about how they were taken, your life wouldn't be worth a—"

"A plugged peso," Lucy put in sweetly.

Win grinned reluctantly. "I'll get you one some day to hang around your neck," he promised. "The reward money is on its way to the valley rehabilitation hospital."

"Thanks," Lucy told him soberly. She looked up as the clock struck midnight, then she hammered a bell sharply. "Closing time," she announced.

There was some good-natured grumbling, but the customers left, used to Lucy's closing rule.

"That means you, too, mister," she said coolly to Win, as she went around turning out lights.

"I'm waiting to walk home with you. Doc Ryan made me promise I would. He seemed to think that you'd be nervous after your experience. I didn't tell him that a tough little button like you didn't have nerves."

"I suppose you would know me much better than doc and Martha," Lucy agreed dryly, but she hurried about making the place secure, then got her coat. She'd been dreading the walk home tonight after her adventure with the renegades.

"Yes, isn't it strange how a smart man like Doc Ryan could be fooled, but then loco weed fools even old range ponies, so I reckon loco-weed ladies can fool humans. You look so pretty and harmless."

"I am harmless," Lucy retorted. If Doc Ryan couldn't convince Win of the sort of girl she really was, there was no use wasting her breath.

"No, you're not. I remember the first time I smelled a beautiful prickly pear blossom. I got my nose full of thorns. Well, you're just about as safe as one of those blossoms."

They were walking down the dark street now. A coyote cried like a baby on a slope and Lucy shivered. She felt cold and alone even with Win trying to match his long stride to her shorter steps. He thought she was pretty but dangerous, just because he'd seen her first behind a bar instead of a kitchen stove.

"Felicia Burns is beautiful, isn't she?" Lucy asked hurriedly, bringing up what seemed like a safer subject.

"Suppose we keep Miss Burns' name out of our talk," Win said sharply. "She's beautiful and real."

"Well, that about covers the

Win wrapped Lucy in his serape and started down the trail. "I suppose it'll take forever to convince you I couldn't see another girl after I met you."

subject." Lucy kept the hurt out of her voice, but her chin trembled.

They had reached Doc Ryan's pretty, white adobe cottage now. Lucy put her hand on Win's arm. "You will keep a close guard on those men?" she asked urgently. "If they escaped, they'd kill me."

"They certainly would. They were beginning to come out of the dose you gave them and I never heard more lurid language," Win said carelessly. "They'll be watched. You'll have a new sheriff soon, but until he is elected, I'll be around. There's no way those men can get out unless someone lets them out and folks are too glad to have them caught to monkey with plots for jail breaking."

"Good night, then, and thanks for walking me home. I was sort of nervous tonight," Lucy admitted.

"Nervous! You?" Win asked derisively. "Don't ever pretend with me, Lucy. I like you better when you're out and out tough, as you were today." He looked down at her, the moonlight showing every expression on Lucy's lovely face even to the dimples tucked into the corners of her mouth.

"Lady loco weed," he said roughly, and gathered her close, kissing her over and over until Lucy was as weak and breathless as she'd been after her morning adventure. "I'd ask you to forgive me, but I know you're used to men losing their heads over your beauty."

"Used to such I may be, but you'll not try it again, Mr. Lawman!" Lucy swung the flat of her hand against Win's mouth with such violence that she felt the skin of his lips break against his teeth.

She was near sobbing as she ran up the walk.

"I'll be soft no longer," she wept into her pillow that night. "He says I'm tough. All right, I'll be tough. I can't act that way around doc and Martha, so I'll have to move out. I'll say I'm getting the rooms ready for Terry."

She moved the next day, over the protests of her friends, to the rooms over the saloon. They had been furnished by the former owner in bright, colorful Mexican style and they would have been a pretty setting for the Lucy of yesterday.

The Lucy of today wore breeches, boots and colorful shirts. She carried a gun tied flat to her leg, and a permit to use it was in the pocket of her shirt. Her soft red mouth became a thin line and word went around that Lucy would stand for no nonsense at all. That she could use the gun she packed, she proved by a match in the vacant lot next to the saloon, with the best shot in the village.

No one guessed at the terror which kept her awake at night, just as Win did not guess that the pretty girl who was his constant companion, once had had a heart interest in the handsome, dashing Dobé. If she could have warned him never to let Felicia hang around the jail,

Lucy would have slept better.

Lucy watched Win and Felicia dancing at the weekly stock club meetings. Felicia, tonight, was in scarlet lace with high-heeled scarlet satin slippers and there were camellias to match in her swinging ash-blond hair. Probably Win would kiss her good night gently, which possibility made Lucy's pillow so often wet with tears.

Later, as she was getting ready for bed, a noise at the foot of the stairs made her unlock her door and walk to the head of the stairs. The light revealed nothing, so she went back into her room and locked the door.

At that moment, something thick and smothering went over her head and cruelly strong fingers gripped her mouth through the cloth, shutting off a wild scream.

She heard the door unlocked and knew by what ruse they had entered her rooms. When she'd opened the door, someone flat against the wall outside had slipped inside while she went to the head of the stairs.

She knew who the two men were, even before they spoke. There'd been a jail break and the two men were free, and she hadn't a soul in the whole town who would come to her rescue or even miss her, until time for the saloon to open in the morning.

They carried Lucy down the back stairs to a station wagon in the alley, then whipped off the serape over her head, tied a gag over her mouth and tossed her into the wagon.

"Better gag the other girl, too," Pecos said gruffly.

"I won't scream. You can leave off the gag," Felicia Burns' voice answered curtly, from the side seat. "This is a fine way to treat me when I was the one who let you out."

"But we're mad about you, Feely," Dobé mocked.

"You killed my dad!"

"And why? Because he found out his pretty daughter was running out nights to meet me," Dobé reminded her. "It was his life or mine. If I killed your dad, you were to blame. I told you to stop chasing me."

Lucy sat in shocked silence, her hands dug deep into her pockets. Through the back window she could see the town already far behind. Well, if Felicia had been taken away, too, there'd be a better chance that they'd be missed after a while.

The station wagon turned off the main highway toward the hills, bound, no doubt, for the hide-out of the renegades. No one ever had been clever enough to find it. Oh, if she only had a gun instead of the cuticle scissors she had been using when she'd heard the noise.

"Gee, you're just a kid, a regular babe-in-the-woods," Felicia said, looking curiously at Lucy. "From what Win said, I thought you were a little toughy." She took off Lucy's gag.

Lucy realized that she must look young and defenseless with her hair in wild curls instead of the

usual pinned up braids. "Aren't you a little frightened?" she asked curiously.

Felicia stretched her silk-clad legs and yawned. "No, I've been with these boys before. They're pretty good chaps unless they have it in for you," she said carelessly. "All this is rather exciting. I was fed up with waiting for Win to break down and really show he loved me."

Lucy, shocked, realized that Felicia was actually enjoying this adventure. She'd get no help from her. And this was the girl whom Win would not even discuss with Lucy!

"If we had something bright to cut up and throw on the trail, a posse could follow us," Lucy said, very low. "We could cut pieces from your dress and toss them out every time the car turned."

"Ruin my dress?" Felicia asked sharply. "Don't be a fool. Hey, boys, can I ride up there with you? I never did like women company." She went climbing over the seat back, settled down between the two men on the front seat and put her head down on Dobé's shoulder.

Lucy's lips set in their new lines. She braided her hair in its two usual braids, then something in its glitter against her tan shirt brought her up short. She put her tiny scissors to work. Slowly, her braids shortened as she cut her hair into rings of red gold. Probably she was sacrificing her pride and glory in vain, but at every turn in the trail she dropped a ringlet.

When they left the car hidden in the brush, her heart failed her, but Dobé led out four horses and helped Felicia mount. When Pecos came to Lucy, he passed his riata around her waist and tied it snugly under the belly of her pony, then leading her pony, he rode after the others.

Bottles jangled in the saddlebags of both men, so Lucy knew they had helped themselves to her stock. They hadn't tied her hands, so she could go on dropping curls. The trail wound around and around, in and out mesquite clumps and stubby pines. Prickly pear clumps held up great waterlily-like blooms to the moonlight.

Lucy was fairly reeling in the saddle when they finally rode out on a broad plateau. Felicia had been complaining loudly for the last mile. As Dobé freed Lucy, she collapsed on the ground, her face turned up to the pitiless moonlight.

"She's just a baby," Felicia said scornfully.

"But that baby doped our liquor until we like to died. We were damn careful not to get the same bottle when we helped ourselves," Dobé answered, with a wide yawn.

"You never gave me a drink." Felicia pouted. "Swigging all the way up here and never a drop for me."

"Because we like our women to smell like roses, not stale whiskey," Pecos said, dropping down beside Dobé.

Felicia put a blanket around the slim girl lying some distance from

the men, then she lay down beside her, for the two men were already asleep.

Over them the mountains brooded. Sage wolves howled in the canyons and coyotes yipped and quarreled.

In the gray dawn, Felicia awakened Lucy. "Both men are sleeping like fools, dead drunk. Why don't you slope out of here, grab a pony and hightail it for town?"

Lucy caught Felicia's arm. "Something is prowling around here—might be mountain lions."

"Or a wild goat. I want you to get out of here, kid," Felicia whispered. "I am all right. I like adventure. I'm crazy about Dobé. If you were gone, I could get him back easy. There is something prowling around. I wish I had a gun—you've got to get away. Oh!"

Wraithlike human figures crept over the plateau between the two girls crouched in the light of the waning moon.

"Darn! I don't want to go back!" Felicia said angrily, under her breath. She gave Lucy a violent shove which tipped her over and rolled her into a crevice in the rocks, then flung herself after her as gun smoke billowed over the plateau. The mountain peaks magnified the roar of guns until it seemed to the cowering girls that an army was fighting it out on the plateau.

"Well, the State won't have to try those chaps," Win's voice announced, when the sounds died away. "Nice clean job."

Felicia moaned, "Dobé—"

Lucy reached up and pressed her fingers over Felicia's lips. "Hush, Felicia! Your whole life can be ruined by what you say in these next few minutes. Don't let the posse guess that they are anything to you except girl-snatchers and murderers."

"Good sound advice, but we happen to know from another prisoner that Felicia let the renegades out," Doc Ryan's voice said clearly. "Come along, Lucy child, I'll take you home and I mean home! Martha has cried her eyes out, worrying over you living alone."

Lucy got to her feet and stepped up on the plateau. "I didn't want folks to think you were tough just because I was being given that reputation," Lucy told him. "Did you find my trail?"

"No, did you leave one? I might have known you would." Win towered over Lucy and his voice wasn't unkind now, just tired and worried. "I located their hide-out soon after we jailed them by turning one of their ponies loose and following it up here."

"Oh!" Lucy touched her hair.

"There's one swell youngster, Win," Felicia said timidly. "She never whimpered once."

"Felicia looked after me like a big sister. She is all right. That Dobé simply hypnotized her." Lucy spoke firmly, her eyes on the two blanket-wrapped burdens being readied for a trip down canyon on mule back.

"I'm breaking up this mutual

admiration society," Win observed gruffly. and he picked up Lucy, wrapped her in his serape and started down the trail. "Doc told me all the way up what a nice girl you were. but I had found that out in one swift slap. I've stayed away from you ever since because I was ashamed, but I'd made up my mind I couldn't keep away any longer. That was how come I found you gone. I went to call on you. The back door of the saloon was open and so was the door to your rooms. Your pajamas and robe were laid out, so I called Doc and hightailed it for the jail. One of the trusties said Felicia let the men out when she left me around midnight."

"She was crazy about Dobé once."

"And I'm crazy about you all the time." Win's big chestnut gelding was carrying double now. The wind snapped at Lucy's braids until her hair flew free. Red-gold sunshine spilled on Win's broad shoulders ahead of the real sunshine already pinking the eastern sky.

Lucy was silent and Win looked down at her, his eyes clouding.

"I suppose you'll make me wait forever to convince you that I couldn't see any other girl after I met you."

"That's the loco-weed strain in me," Lucy reminded him. "You want to fight, not give in to it. And you and Felicia—"

"I never loved Felicia!" Win cut in. "And I've never forgotten kissing you. You're the only girl for me."

"Then I might as well let you go on being locoed." The Irish dimples came out of hiding for the first time in days. "Besides, my brother Terry is on his way here. all well, and he says he's going to make me go back to San Antonio to live. He's just found out what business it was that uncle gave him and is he burned up! His temper is worse than yours, but I'm used to tempers. I rather like them." Lucy ducked her head, then thought better of it. After all, she had waited a long time for Win to kiss her as if he really meant it.

"Lady, your kisses pack a wallop like your famous Mickey Finns," Win declared, rather breathlessly, after a long interval.

THE END.

She reckoned that it was about time the tables were turned and that, for a change, a dude took a cowboy for a ride.

THE ROPE TRICK

by George Cory Franklin

DOROTHY CABOT looked out of the window of her Pullman, at the sagebrush flats on the Puerco Wash, and smiled appreciatively. "It's regular old-time country. I'm glad to see it. I was afraid from what Judie wrote me, about their having box stalls for their fancy saddle stock and water piped into the feed lots, that I was going to waste my visit, riding through lanes between fields of alfalfa in a high-powered automobile."

The porter approached, brush in hand. "That long whistle was for Houck Siding, miss." He glanced down at the stickers on Dorothy's suitcase. "The station ain't goin' to look like Back Bay to you-all," he said with a chuckle, "and there won't be any taxi to take you to the hotel, 'cause there ain't no hotel, jus' a tradin' post and some loading pens for the cattle they ship from here."

A sarcastic reply flashed into Dorothy's mind. She was on the point of telling him that she had been born on a cow ranch, and this siding would be like home to her, when her eyes rested on the very exclusive slippers she had bought in a Fifth Avenue shop, that the porter was wiping off reverently. The sheer hose below the skirt of her tailored tweed suit made her realize that her whole outfit would be misleading to a Western man. "Judie wrote me that Harold would meet the train and take me to the ranch," she mused. "I hate to have him think that his wife's closest

friend is a tenderfoot. If I'd thought about it, I'd have put on my overalls and flannel shirt."

The train was slowing down now, so there was not time for her to go to the dressing room and make the change. She followed the porter to the end of the car and stood in the vestibule, looking out past a long line of corrals to a platform on which stood a tall young man in the regulation riding clothes of the West.

"Gee, Judie certainly picked a swell-looker," she thought. "I supposed when she wrote me that Harold looked like Gary Cooper, that she was lovesick, but I'm not so sure that he's not handsomer than any actor in Hollywood."

The man came forward to take the suitcase from the porter's hand. Dorothy put on her sweetest smile. "Hello, brother, aren't you going to kiss me?"

A flash of merriment came into the brown eyes, "Which I shore am." He put down the suitcase and gathered Dorothy into his arms with a fervor that left no doubt of his willingness to comply. Dorothy felt the color come into her cheeks. "Well," she gasped, "I wonder what Judie would think of that?"

"Judie wouldn't care at all. She's so crazy about Harold that no one else counts."

"Then you . . . you are not Harold?"

"No. My name is Gale Mason. I had to go to Holbrook on business, and Harold asked me to lead a horse down here for you to ride to their ranch. He said you would have some baggage so I brought a pack horse, too." He glanced at Dorothy's suit. "You can't ride in that outfit, and there is no store here where you could buy anything fit to ride in."

"Is there some place where I can change? I have clothes in my trunk."

"There's a room in the trading post and the Mexican girl there will help you."

That last sentence set off the fireworks. "Of all things!" Dorothy thought. "He thinks I'm such a poor, helpless little nincompoop, that I can't get into riding clothes without a maid to ride herd on me. I'll show that big jasper a thing or two." She motioned to where her small airplane trunk stood on the platform. "Would it be too much trouble to bring that into the store?"

Mason went to the trunk, tossed it lightly to his shoulder and led the way into the post. Dorothy noticed that the trader and his clerk showed him marked deference. Evidently his trade was worth an effort to please.

"This lady would like to use your room for a few minutes," Mason explained. He put down the trunk, loosened the fastenings and went out.

By this time, Dorothy was able to see the absurdity of her mistake and laugh at it. "I wonder why neither Judie or Harold came to meet me? She's been after me to visit her ever since she got married. It's awfully queer." She

paused a moment, considering. She nodded her head understandingly. "It was a put-up job so that I would have to spend several hours alone with Mr. Mason." She was taking out the Levis and shirt she had intended to put on, then stopped and laid the rough clothes back in the trunk. She took out the riding trousers she had bought to wear when she rode in the parks in the East. She looked longingly at her old soft, cowgirl hat, set her lips firmly and tucked her yellow curls under the brim of a silly little hat that, while exceedingly becoming, was wholly out of place with riding clothes.

"I'll make him think I'm from Boston. That sticker on my suitcase caused the porter to think that I came from Back Bay. Cowboys are eternally playing tricks on Easterners, and here's where I play even for all time." She was about to close the trunk when the bright, shining barrel of a fancy gun she had won at a shooting gallery caught her eye. How well she remembered the admiration on the faces of the men in the party that night, when she had picked up the little .22 rifle and ran up a string of bull's eyes that had won the toy which she would never have thought of wearing in a place where a real weapon might be needed.

The pearl-handled gun was complete with holster and belt. She buckled it high around her waist. "If Gale Mason can keep his face straight when he sees this layout, he deserves the kiss he stole." She was fair enough to realize that Gale was not in the least to blame, however. "And I don't know as I'm sorry, or that I wouldn't like to have him kiss me again and really mean it."

She went to the door to tell Gale that she was ready to go. He was leaning against the counter talking to the trader. "As I was saying, there is bound to be a killing over these springs sooner or later," she heard him say. "Ever since the first Mormons settled in Lake Valley the springs have been considered public property. Jabe Carter, nor any other tough hombre, can't hog that water without a fight."

"I guess I'm ready," Dorothy ventured to interrupt. Gale looked actually dazed, his face colored. He was embarrassed, no doubt about it. The trader turned away and began moving something on the shelf. Dorothy could see his shoulders shake. A Navaho squaw, who had just entered the store, dropped her blanket on the floor and made no attempt to recover it. Mason jerked his hat down over his eyes and strode into the back room, picked up the trunk and went out without saying a word. Dorothy followed him meekly.

It was good to see the capable manner in which Mason threw the trunk against the saddle on the park horse, balanced it with a sack of groceries he had bought at the post, and laid Dorothy's suitcase in between. He turned away to throw the lash rope free and Dorothy saw that he was struggling to keep from laughing. She had to force her

on her accurate shooting, in case Carter started to draw. She neck-reined the mare slightly to the left in order to have a clear space between her and Carter, and shifted the muzzle of the weapon to cover his left breast. Unconsciously, her muscles had taken the easy, natural position of a trained marksman, so skillful that stance might be wholly disregarded. No gunman could have failed to read the sign correctly.

Carter's shifty eyes caught a glimpse of his real danger. He stepped back, raising both hands well above his belt. "Mind, I'm not being bluffed!" he shouted. "I'll take my men away, but we'll be back and next time I'll have force enough to carry it through."

Mason still had not seen Dorothy's play. Not once had he taken his eyes off Carter, and as soon as Dorothy saw that the danger was over, she put the gun back in its holster and sat back demurely, watching Carter as he waved his men out of the borrow pit where they had been getting dirt for the embankment.

She sat there for several minutes until Mason, apparently remembering that he had a guest, turned in the saddle. An amused smile twisted his mouth, "Your hat," he said, and this time he made no attempt to restrain his laughter. Dorothy put her hand to her head to find that the silly little hat had been turned squarely across, so that the feather that should have trailed gracefully behind, hung limp as a rag over one eye. She laughed, too, and for the first time they talked

with something of the understanding that people who lived in the same environment had. A half hour later, they rode into the dooryard of the 33 Ranch, and Judie was running down the path to meet them.

Dorothy was surprised again when Mason did not appear at the supper table. She had assumed that he would be there. In fact, she had been thinking of him when she put on her pure silk crêpe dress she had bought at Bonwit Teller's in New York, which she felt would be suitable for the cowboy dance that Judie had promised they would have.

Judie, happily married, was anxious to see her friend equally

well situated. She caught the inquiring look in Dorothy's eyes. "You thought Gale would be here, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh.. Where is he?"

"He said he had to go to his own ranch tonight, but we are going to go down that way in the morning and stop there for lunch."

"Oh."

"What's the matter, Dot, didn't you two hit it off?"

"Yes, only he thinks I'm a poor, helpless kid from Boston and—"

"I see, you not only let him think so, but that's why you wore that crazy outfit you had on yesterday. Am I right?"

Dorothy had to admit she was, and told her friend the story, including the kiss episode which nearly knocked Judie out. "Dot, you didn't!" she exclaimed.

"I certainly did. Harold did kiss me last night, didn't he?"

"Yes, but Gale is the most proper man you ever saw. He's an absolute icicle where girls are concerned."

"Well, there was nothing the least bit frosty about the way he responded to treatment."

"But, Dot, you can't go on with this. Why, it would spoil your whole visit. You don't know how fine Gale is, and when he finds out that you've deceived him—"

"Who said I deceived him? There isn't a thing I did that I wouldn't do again, including the kiss."

"But, Dottie, you don't understand. Somewhere, sometime, Gale has been fooled by a girl and he thinks that all of us are inclined to be deceitful. Not that he is in the least bit prudish, far from it, but he simply doesn't trust women, and when he finds out that you made him ridiculous— Well, I'm just sorry, that's all."

When it came time to start for Mason's place, Dorothy suggested that they drive down in the buckboard instead of riding horseback. This suited Judie. She wanted her friend to love this country as much as she did, and if they drove a pair of gentle horses, she would have a better opportunity to point out the beauty spots.

Half a mile from Mason's mountain home, Judie stopped the team on a high bluff from which they had an unbroken view of the valley ten miles long by three wide.

Looking through the binoculars, she saw three men ride into the Mason yard. Her heart stopped beating when she saw one of them was Jabe Carter.

A stream of clear mountain water wound through the valley, which was well stocked with white-faced cattle and several bands of horses. Dorothy saw Arizona at its best.

Judie pointed with her whip at a line of comfortable-looking log buildings in the north end of the valley. "That's Gale's place, there close to that waterfall. He owns all this land and runs a herd that takes the blue ribbons at the fairs in Phoenix and Pomona. I want you to see Pride of the West, his thoroughbred stallion. We have some colts from him that Harold says are prize winners."

Dorothy gave herself up to unrestricted admiration of the home and its superb setting. She was so enthralled by it that she was unusually quiet when Julie stopped in the yard and Dorothy saw Mason coming hurriedly from a corral near the stables to welcome them. He was dragging a lightweight, smoothly braided rawhide rope, by the horn honda, which he had evidently just put on the rope, since he carried a worn one in his other hand.

"How come you drove down?" he queried. "I was intending to take you up the trail to the mesa above the waterfall." He showed Judie the broken honda. "The brown colt set back and cracked it. Luckily, I had one to put on." He put the loose end of the rope through the new honda and ran out a small loop as he talked.

He dropped the rope on the ground and helped the girls out of the buckboard. "I'll put your team in the stable," he said. "Judie, you take Miss Cabot into the house and show her the rooms." He got into the buckboard and turned the team around.

It was as natural for Dorothy to pick up the pretty rope as it would have been for a girl in a different environment to have retrieved a piece of expensive china. The feel of the braid aroused the desire to swing it, and as they walked toward the porch, Dorothy unconsciously coiled the rope as neatly as she would have one that she expected to throw. She had the coil in her hand when Mason returned. There was an exultant smile on his face, tempered by a disappointed expression in his eyes. "Well, it worked," he observed. "You probably wouldn't have fallen for the trick if you hadn't been interested in the ranch and didn't think what you were doing. Where do you really live, Wyoming or Colorado?"

For an instant, Dorothy failed to realize what Mason meant, then as she glanced down at the rope, she understood. She had fallen for a test as old as the Western range. No one but a person who knew how to turn the rope as it ran through her hands could have made a perfect coil. She could tell that Mason's suspicions had been aroused and he had deliberately dropped the rope where she would be likely to pick it up, knowing that if she were an experienced range rider she would be almost certain to coil it, and so prove that her apparent ignorance of all things Western was mere pretense.

Judie attempted to laugh the matter off, but Dorothy wasn't fooled. She knew that as Judie had said, making a man like Mason appear ridiculous to himself would be the end of anything more than a very formal friendship, and with that conviction, Dorothy realized that she had fallen for Gale Mason harder than for any man she had ever met.

During the next few days, Mason came frequently to the 33 and saw Dorothy in the clothes she was accustomed to wear on her father's ranch. He was courteous and pleasant, but was unquestionably putting a curb on his emotions. If the memory of that kiss was as precious to him as it was becoming to Dorothy, he had no intention of letting it bias his cool judgment.

One day, when her visit was almost over, Dorothy saddled the same mare that Mason had brought to Houck Station, and rode alone to the top of a mountain about five miles from Judie's home. She came to a point from which she had a clear view of the valley and Mason's place less than a mile distant. She was looking through the powerful binoculars that Judie had lent her, and saw three men ride into the Mason yard. For an instant, Dorothy's heart stopped beating when she saw that one of the men was Jabe Carter.

She saw Mason come from the stables. He was, of course, unarmed. The odds were heavy—three against one. Probably Carter had learned in some manner that

You ease off beard in jigtime, men,
With Thin Gillettes—four blades for ten—
They save you dough and treat you well—
And your face sure looks and feels swell!
Outlast ordinary blades two to one
Gillette
4 for 10¢
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

Mason's crew had gone to Lake Valley that day. Dorothy had not carried the fancy six-shooter since the day she had used it to bluff Carter, but the fact that she was unarmed made no difference. The man she had come to love was in deadly danger. Her one thought was to get to the Mason ranch in time to help. There was no trail down the mountainside, but Dorothy had ridden just such country when chasing broomtails in Wyoming. The mare was sure-footed and managed to keep her feet, even when forced to run over rocks and down slides, where dirt and shale piled up belly-deep.

A branch of catclaw tore her shirt. Dorothy hardly felt the blood on her shoulder. She clutched a cholla and cut her hand. The desert was taking its toll. With her clothes torn and blood trickling from a scratch on her cheek, she dashed into the yard. The tracks in the dust showed there had been a scuffle, but Mason was not in sight. She ran to the door and tried the knob. It opened and she went into the living room. Mason lay on the lounge beside the fireplace. Dorothy dropped on her knees beside him.

"Gale, are you badly hurt?" she cried.

"Huh, who is it?"

"It's me, Dorothy Cabot. I was on Lookout Point and saw Carter come."

Mason's eyes opened. "It was quite a fight. I felt played out, sort of. Was Carter telling the truth when he said you threw a gun on him the day we was at the reservoir?"

"Yes. I was going to quit fooling, but when you tried to keep me from going with you to meet Carter because there would be rough talk, I saw you wouldn't believe I was the real thing, so I used my own judgment and stopped him in the only way I knew."

"I'm sure glad you did. He was loaded for bear that day. I guess he won't bother us any more. He promised to give up the spring if I wouldn't hit him again. After all, he did us a favor. I've been acting the fool, Dot. Can you forget it and let me try to make you love me?"

Dorothy suddenly forgot that she had been cruelly treated by the desert. The sun was bright, and outside a lark was singing from the top of a fence post. "I haven't been so smart myself." She pressed her lips gently against a bruised spot on Gale's cheek. "Do you feel better now, dear?"

"Another kiss like that and I'll be plumb well. Let's go send a telegram to your father."

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Dust! It's the breath of the devil, witherin' every livin' thing it touches, more proper for funerals 'n' for weddings.

DUSTY TRAIL TO NOWHERE

by Bill Severn

THE posted notices said the Circle Cross Ranch would be sold by the bank at public auction, twelve noon on Wednesday, the 25th. They were crowded here in front of the bank, the curious townspeople to look, Matt Drennan to buy, Kate Bradford and her pa to lose. Dale had promised he would come back in time, but Dale had failed her.

The bank president squinted at his watch, thumbed shut the lid, nodded to the auctioneer. A month ago, when Dale had gone to take the job with the railroad, working with the crew making windmills for water tanks, he had kissed Kate and told her, "Quit worrying, darling. I'll be back with money to pay the note and enough to spare for us to start marriage."

So long, so very long, that had been a dream. As foreman of her father's ranch, Dale had struggled with them through three years of hardship, worry, drought and dust. She had believed Dale would make another miracle of his determination and of their love. Now the bank was foreclosing on that dream.

The auctioneer started to read. Kate glanced at Drennan, hands in his pockets, shoulders slumped. Drennan's fancy-priced lawyers had established the fact that Indian Stream was entirely on his Bar X property and he had denied water rights to the Circle Cross, leaving

the Bradford ranch an upland island of dust and dying cattle, backed only by the inadequate trickle of Gulch Creek across the ridge.

Drennan saw her look and came over. "I'm sorry you're takin' this personal," he told pa. "I offered to buy you out. I'm still offerin' to let you and Kate stay and run the Circle Cross for me."

"Words is cheap, Drennan." Pa put his arm around Kate's shoulders. "As cheap as your schemin'. But there ain't even cheap words to spend talkin' to you."

"You cain't fix the blame on me. The water's on my land. I cain't help it if you didn't know that when you bought your spread. And why shouldn't I bid you out now? Somebody's goin' to buy."

"You know there won't be bids against you," Kate told Drennan. "Nobody wants it without your water rights. You'll get the Circle Cross for the amount of the bank note."

"Anyone's free to bid." Drennan shook his head. "You and your pa cud it over without bein' bitter. I'm offerin' you a home, to stay there and run it for me."

"Circle Cross was my ranch," pa cut him off sharply. "Mine and Kate's and Dale Austin's. I won't run it for another. 'Specially another such as you."

The auctioneer's voice droned like a bee waiting to sting. Wind, hot and dry, caught the dust of the town street and sanded it against their faces.

"—those certain properties lying north northwest of the plot herein mentioned," the auctioneer finished. "I'll now accept the bids."

"I'm biddin' six hundred and twenty-three dollars," Drennan offered. It was the exact amount of the note.

"I have a bid." The auctioneer lifted his mallet. "Do I hear another?"

Pa's arm pressed more tightly around Kate. She turned her face against his bony shoulder. "Going." The mallet came down on the block. "Going—"

A shot split the tense silence, slapped an echo. Kate's head jerked up. She saw the auctioneer's mallet spin from his fingers, winged to the dust like a bird dropped flying.

"You've got another bid, mister," a voice drawled. "Seven hundred and fifty. You didn't give me time to talk, so I had to put it in with this." He lifted the gun, dropped it back into the holster at his hip.

"Dale!" Kate broke from her father's arms and ran to him. "Oh, Dale—Dale! I didn't think you'd get here. I thought you weren't coming back."

He hugged her tightly a moment, held her in the firm security of his arms, bent his head and kissed her. "I didn't mean to worry you and pa. It had to be done like this."

The auctioneer climbed down and picked up the mallet. He raised it over the block. "Seven hundred and fifty dollars. Is that all I hear?"

Moving her lips from Dale's, Kate saw Drennan's face go florid

with anger. "One thousand." Drennan yelled.

Kate shivered as Dale took his arms away. He stepped forward, his head lifted so that the full sun caught the tan of his face and narrowed his gray eyes. "The terms of this auction are cash, according to the posted notice. You got the cash, Drennan?"

Drennan swallowed, bunched his shoulders. "I got it in the bank. That's as good."

"Not here, it isn't." Dale jerked a leather pouch from the pocket of his plaid shirt, dropped the money in front of the auctioneer. "There's my seven fifty in cash. Let's see yours, Drennan."

"I'll fetch it from the bank." Drennan started to move.

"The terms of the sale are public auction at noon. The sale won't wait, by law. You tell him." Dale nodded at the auctioneer.

The auctioneer saw Dale's fingers close around the handle of the gun. He glanced at the splintered mallet. "That's right," he said to Drennan. "Those are the terms." He paused only a second. "Seven hundred and fifty in cash. Going, going, gone!" He slammed the wooden block hard, picked up the money. He scrawled on the paper before him, folded it and handed it to Dale: "The Circle Cross is yours."

"You cain't—" Drennan started.

Dale moved in front of him. His fingers clenched into a fist. "Sale's over," he said quietly.

Drennan took a step back. "You cain't last out the drought," he blustered. "I'll get the Circle Cross when you all dry out and blow away."

Dale's fist lifted. Kate gripped his arm. "Don't mind what he says," she told Dale. "He doesn't matter now."

Dale's glance shifted slowly from Drennan to Kate, softened. She felt his eyes following the red cushion of hair that framed the golden tan of her face. His eyes found hers and their glances held. He chuckled softly. The smile spread from his eyes to his lips. "I reckon I do have a better use for my arms right now." He put them around her.

Driving the spring wagon back toward the Circle Cross, Dale handed pa the deed. "Sorry I had to give you both the frights, waiting until the last second. But I had to so that Drennan wouldn't get wise there'd be bids against him. If he'd known, he'd have brought enough cash to cover or sent one of his men hurrying to the bank after it."

Pa folded the paper, tucked it back into Dale's pocket. "The Circle Cross is yours now, son." He grinned at Kate. "Would've been anyhow soon." The old man's eyes clouded. "But you ain't bought much. Things is worse, Dale, since you left. Ain't as much water as sweat on a stone. Gulch Creek is dryin' and what critters get water, it ain't enough to slake 'em at all."

Kate watched Dale's eyes close. "The rain will come," she said softly. "It's got to come. We can't lose out now."

Dale shook his head. "Men we

can fight. Drennan and his kind we can beat out. But the dust—you can't shoot it and you can't pin it down with your fists. You can curse against it but the streams dry and the cattle die and you can't even dream different when it strangles."

Shorty, Pete and Tex were ranged along the top rail of the corral fence in deep pow-wow when Kate and Dale went down the next morning to get horses. Holding his arm, Kate felt Dale's muscles go tight under his shirt.

The men stopped talking. "Shorty, I told you to bring some of the horses down from the north range," Dale said. "And you, Tex, why're you sitting? I told you—"

"We want our pay."

"You'll get it the end of the month. This is the 26th. What's it about?"

"We ain't sure we're gonna get it when time comes. We want it now." Pete looked down. "We don't work until our twenty bucks is counted."

"That go with you, Shorty?" Dale swung his glance. "Tex?"

Tex unhooked his boot heels from the rail. "Ain't exactly that. We'd keep workin' along with you if it made sense, but—"

"What's the good?" Shorty raised his hands, let them drop. "We ain't the kind that'd run out on an outfit. But you been workin' steers long's I have, Austin. You know there ain't no use here. No water and all of us makin' a bluff of it, like we thought there was a chance. We gotta look for other keep. You'll be pullin' out, too. Then where'll Pete and Tex and me be for fixin's? Like I say, if there was any chance—"

"Drennan's offered you more money, hasn't he?" Dale waited. There was no denial. "Get out!" Dale roared it, sudden anger flushing beneath the tan of his face. "Get!"

They slid down from the rails. Tex stopped. "It ain't only the money. We'd stick if there was use to. You know there ain't. You know we're right. Witherin' up here and—"

"I said get!" Dale struggled to keep his fists at his sides. Kate could see the struggle in the white of his knuckles. "I'll send your due pay over to Drennan's."

"We don't want no pay, Austin. You folks need it worse than—" Shorty's words broke against the stone of Dale's expression. Silently, he joined the others.

Dale's fingers flexed against the rough wood of the rail. Kate followed his glance as the three men walked toward the bunkhouse, their boots raising tiny storms of dust. She put her fingers over his.

Dale looked at her. He was silent a long time, looking at her, looking beyond her at the house. "They're right," he said finally. "They know and we got to face it."

"No! Dale, you can't quit!"

"Not quitting to use sense before everything's gone."

"I'll ride," she said quickly. "You told me I ride like a man. And pa will, too. He's old, maybe, but he can still climb a saddle. We'll be

your hands. The three of us can do it together."

"We can't bring water back to Gulch Creek." Dale's eyes shut. "I dreamed, too, Kate. I dreamed as hard as you did. I dreamed of us, getting married and living here on the Circle Cross."

"But you—"

Gently, he put his fingers upon her lips. "Listen to me, darling. You and pa have got to sell to Drennan. I'll get my job back on the railroad. You'll have money from the sale to keep going and when I've saved a little, I'll come and get you."

"This is my home." Kate backed away. The words choked as tight as the dust in her throat, piled up and wouldn't come out. "We can't build our marriage on failure."

"It will be failure if we stay here. Can't you see? It's best for you and pa, for all of us. You can't live here like this, wither away as part of this dying place. It would get all of us, dry us out inside. We got to move now, while we can get out with something. Alone, maybe I'd try to fight it through. I can't do that to you. I love you too much for that, Kate."

"Love!" Her hands went to her hips. "You dare tell me you love me! You think I could love a man who'd run like a whipped coyote? No, Dale. When I marry, I'll marry a man. I thought you were one. I guess I was wrong."

"Kate!"

"Go with the others. Go on, sell us out. The ranch is yours. There's nothing pa and I can do about it, except fight as long as we can."

She swung around. She began running. She ran toward the house, ran away from him, away from his nearness and the terrible new hurt in his eyes.

Blindly, she ran up the steps and into the house. She threw herself on the sofa in the parlor and tried to cry, and couldn't, because the dust and the pain were too tight for the easy release of tears.

She heard the door open. She tightened herself, sat silently, looking down, waiting for him to speak. There was an unfamiliar shuffling noise, feet dragging at the door.

Kate glanced up. It wasn't Dale. It was her father, leaning against the wall inside the door. "Pa!" she screamed, and rushed to him.

His face was white. His arm, across his chest, gripped his other shoulder. Dark crimson seeped through his fingers, stained his hand.

"You've been shot!"

"Ain't nothin' much. I—" He tried to talk. "Drennan's men was —" The wince of pain stopped him.

Kate helped him to the sofa, made him lie down. She ripped away the stained shirt sleeve. The bullet would have to come out before she bandaged the ugly wound. "Lie quiet."

She went outside and cupped her hands. "Dale!" She turned and called the other way. "Dale!" She saw him then, at the other side of the bunkhouse. She shouted again.

He lifted his hand to shade his eyes against the sun. She waved him toward the house. He started running.

Kate heated the knife in the flame of the lamp, held pa's arm while Dale lifted out the lead pellet.

"Fence was down," pa said, while Kate was putting on a dressing of cloth torn from a freshly washed curtain. "Some of our steers busted through to get to the stream. I went to get 'em and Drennan's men picked me off and started on the steers. Shot five. I didn't have no gun or I'd of—"

"I've got a gun." Dale's lips tightened. His hands went to his belt. "And I'm going to use it now!"

Kate dropped the end of the bandage, stood before Dale, blocking his way to the door. "You were talking to me about being sensible. This is what Drennan wants you to do, go to his property where he can get you. That's why he cut the fence to Indian Stream."

"And that's what I'm doing. You expect me to sit here and not fight? You expect that, Kate?"

"A while ago, you didn't want to fight. You wanted to sell out to Drennan."

"That has nothing to do with this. That has nothing to do with fighting back when there's something to fight against."

"What's this about sellin' out?" pa asked. "You was goin' to—"

"Not the way Kate makes it sound. I figured it would be better for you and Kate to live in town until we all could get a new start some place. I—" He looked at pa's bandaged arm. "I reckon now I was wrong about that. I reckon making windmills for the railroad can wait until—"

"Windmills!" Kate gripped his arm. Her eyes were wide, excited. "We've been so blind, all of us. Why can't we build windmills here on the ranch? They'd get water and—"

"Maybe." Dale seemed to be testing the idea against what he knew of building windmills. "Yes. Yes, we could!" He pounded his fist against the palm of his hand, as excited now over the idea as she was. "We'll dig half a dozen wells, maybe more. And—" He frowned and some of his enthusiasm died. "It takes men to drill and it takes money for the mills, lumber and equipment."

"We could get the bank to renew the note," Kate suggested. "They'd put up that much again, knowing they could always sell to Drennan if we couldn't meet it. It would be risking everything, but—"

"But it could mean winning everything, too," Dale said softly. "Everything we want, together." He took her in his arms.

Three days, the drilling crew worked. Three days, Dale worked with them and Kate watched anxiously. On the third day, the digger in charge shook his head and told them, "Ain't no use. It's like I said to start."

"But you can't stop now."

"I can't change the earth, either, ma'am." He poked his boot at it.

"It's hard. There has to be sand or a looselike underlayer 'neath the top to be water in any amount."

"There's no water, none at all?"

"Maybe some. Down deep. Not enough to last any time if we did strike it. We got other wells to drill. I need my men. Can't stay longer."

"Please, just another day. Maybe—"

"We're not done fighting while there's a chance," Dale cut in. "Only when there's no chance left." He turned to the digger. "You need your men, but you've got spare drills and pipe. Take your men, but rent us that."

The man put his fingers to the stubble on his chin. "Don't work that way usual, but—"

"We'll pay you half of what it would be if the men stayed."

Kate figured rapidly in her mind. A week of that would use up the rest of the bank loan.

The digger shrugged. "It's your gamble."

They worked together until it was dark and, after that, by the flickering light of lanterns. Dale cranking the long pipe down. Kate and pa, despite his wounded shoulder, taking turns holding the metal brace in place so the pipe would grind within it.

Even with the sun gone, the heat lingered. Another length of pipe. another. Down. More dirt. Down.

Her back aching, her fingers numb, Kate fought to hold the brace in place. Dale smiled encouragement, his shoulder close to hers, his hand cranking, then shifting to the other hand, using both hands. "You'd better grab some rest," he said. "Pa and I'll go it for a spell." When she tried to protest, he added. "You'll be fresher and it'll go faster then."

Reluctantly, she stretched out on the ground the other side of the lanterns. The sound of the drill made music, wonderful music. Kate decided it was the most beautiful lullaby she had ever heard. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, she realized the drill had stopped. She moved to get up. Dale spoke from beside her, "We're all resting awhile. Can't do it all in one day." He was next to her, his elbows on the ground, chin cupped in his hands. The other side of her, pa snored softly in deep sleep.

"You're so swell to go on with the drilling," she whispered. "So very swell."

His lips were gentle. They brushed against her closed eyelids. "Sleep now, Kate. We'll start at dawn. Sleep, darling, and dream. Dream about us." He took her hand and held it. He kept her hand, touched his lips to the tips of her fingers, then curled her hand through his arm and held it there, against the smooth warmth of his cheek.

Late the next afternoon, Kate sent down the long cylinder with the float valve in the bottom, just as it had gone down a dozen times. She pulled it up again, scraping it against the sides of the pipe. "It feels heavy. It is heavy." She pulled faster.

In the bottom was a cup of water.

"Water! Water!" Cool water that spilled on the ground. Water that poured over their blistered hands. She sent it racing down into the ground again. She pulled it up and poured cold water over Dale's perspired head. It ran down his face and soaked his shirt, and he grinned through the streaks the water made on his face, washing through the dust.

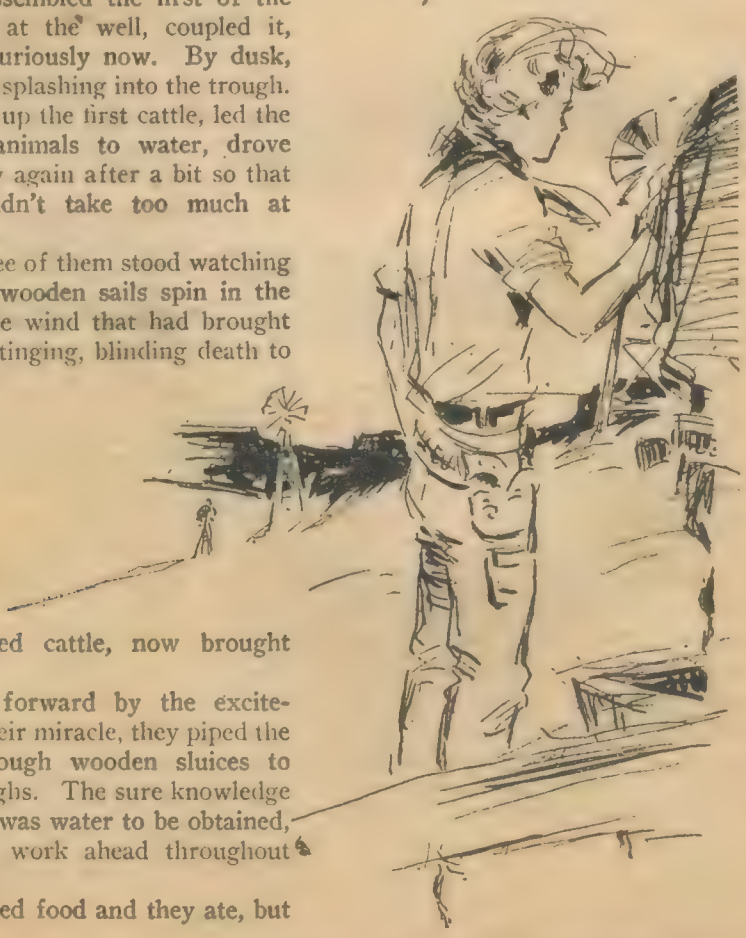
They assembled the first of the windmills at the well, coupled it, working furiously now. By dusk, water was splashing into the trough. Pa moved up the first cattle, led the thirsting animals to water, drove them away again after a bit so that they wouldn't take too much at once.

The three of them stood watching the mill's wooden sails spin in the wind. The wind that had brought dust and stinging, blinding death to the parched cattle, now brought water.

Driven forward by the excitement of their miracle, they piped the water through wooden sluices to other troughs. The sure knowledge that there was water to be obtained, drove the work ahead throughout the week.

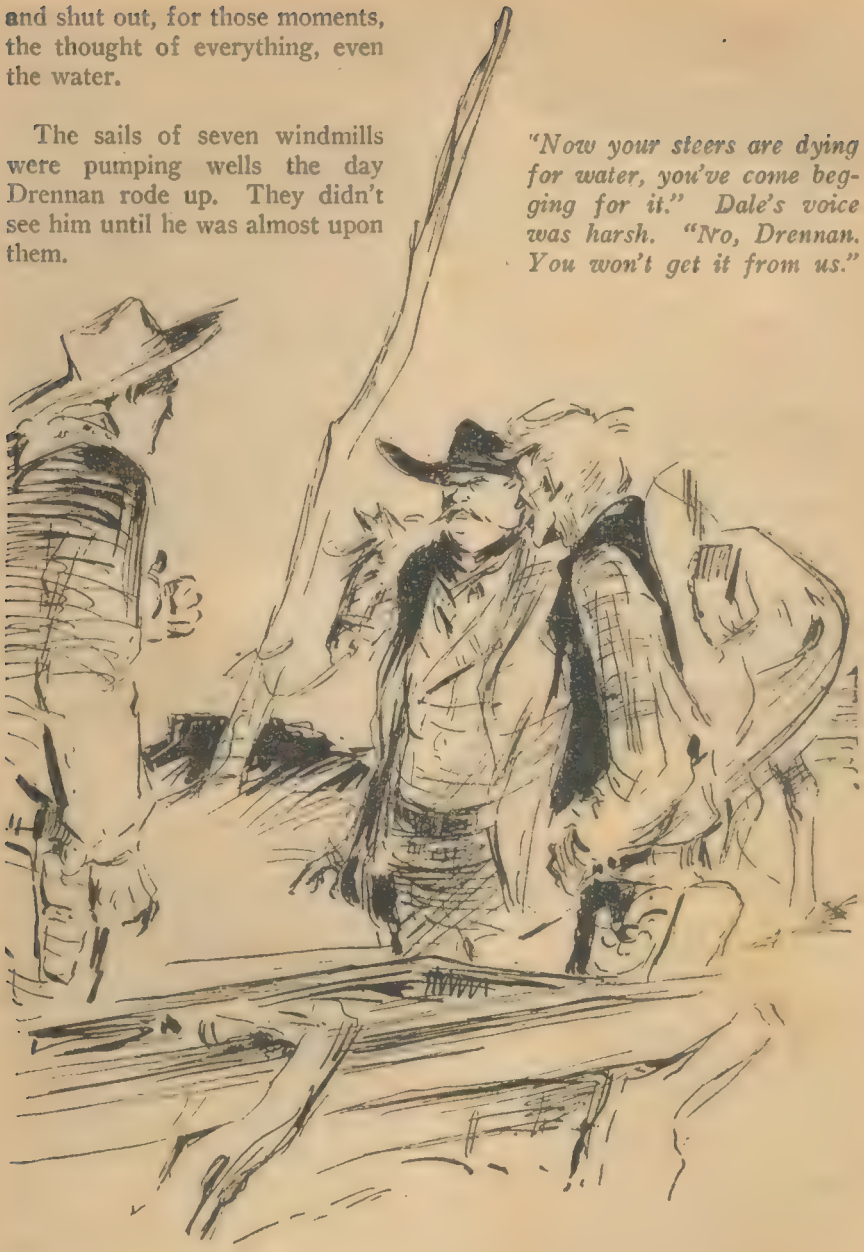
Kate fixed food and they ate, but they hardly realized they were eating. Pa moved up the cattle to the finished wells, riding back and forth, forgetting his wounded shoulder. Kate slept sometimes and laughed sometimes, talked sometimes. But all that held her thoughts was the reality of water, the sounding of the drill, the throbbing of metal beneath her hands.

Only that, and the moments Dale held her in his arms. He kissed her



and shut out, for those moments, the thought of everything, even the water.

The sails of seven windmills were pumping wells the day Drennan rode up. They didn't see him until he was almost upon them.



"Now your steers are dying for water, you've come begging for it." Dale's voice was harsh. "No, Drennan. You won't get it from us."

Dale dropped his hand for his gun, but Kate's fingers tightened on his arm. "No," she said, as she had once before. "He doesn't matter now."

Drennan swung down from his horse and came over to them. He looked at Dale and then at Kate. He spoke to pa, "I come to swear to you, Bradford, that I didn't know nothin' about my men shootin' at you." He waited a second. "I ain't given no orders of that kind and I won't. Shootin's one thing I don't aim to start. You hate me and I cain't help that. But everythin' I done was square and legal. Shootin' an unarmed man ain't. I come to tell you."

"They were your men," Dale told him. "If they shot it was because they thought you wanted it that way."

"Hold on, son. We're neighbors. We've got to go on bein' neighbors and—"

"Don't 'son' me. I'm telling you to get, and fast."

Drennan didn't move. "You folks need money. I'll make you a deal. Indian Stream is 'most dried out. There ain't enough water for all my stock. Let me water some of 'em here and I'll pay you by the head."

"That's why you came." Dale's lips were tight. "Now your steers are dying for water like ours were, and you've come begging for it. No, Drennan. You won't get it from us. Build your own windmills."

"You know you got the only well drills hereabouts that ain't bein' used. You know I cain't. You fix blame on me 'cause I took the stream water that was rightful mine. Now you're doin' the same to me with your wells. I'm tellin' you I know I was wrong. I know what it means, watchin' your cattle die. You cain't boot a man when he's down and beggin' for help, Austin. You cain't do that to a neighbor."

"You did it to us. You wouldn't be crawling to us now if you didn't need us. You've got a lot of pretty words, Drennan. But they don't listen good to me. Now, get!"

Drennan looked at pa. "That go for you, Bradford?"

"It goes for me, Drennan."

Kate watched him ride away. "He was right," she said slowly.

"What?"

"I said Drennan was right. We should have sold him the use of our water."

"You ain't forgot he shot me, daughter, have you?" pa asked sharply.

"He was going to run us out," Dale cut in. "You forgotten that?"

"No," Kate said. "I haven't forgotten any of it. But he admits he was wrong. He's willing to work out terms. We do have to live next to each other, whether we like Drennan or not."

"We've got the water now. We're keeping it."

"But don't you see, that's what makes feuds and shooting, when one side holds everything or wants to grab everything and won't let anybody else have it? This is a new land out here, but it's part of America. America was built on

sharing. That's how we've got to make our homes here, too, Dale. Not by being selfish."

"High-sounding words. Like Drennan's. We should let him keep what's his and let him take what's ours when his is gone. That what you want?"

"No. Make him pay for it. Make him pay and pay plenty, so he'll know how wrong he was and won't do it again. But, yes, sell him water at that price. We don't have to make a friend of him. I'm not asking that. But I—"

"And I'm telling you, Kate. It—"

It went on for a week. Pa sided first with one and then the other, trying in vain to keep peace between them. Kate was miserable and she saw, with no satisfaction at all, that Dale was miserable, too.

The Circle Cross was coming to life. The cattle had water. Windmills pumped their precious liquid and the cattle began to show promise of fattening up for a profit by summer's end. Everything was working out the way they hadn't dared dream it would. Everything, except Kate and Dale.

"Why don't you youngsters get married first and then fight?" pa suggested jokingly, trying to draw Kate out of her black mood.

"I'll never marry him. Never! He's stubborn and selfish and I . . . I hate him."

"Uh-huh." Pa sighed. "You hate Dale so much you cry for him all night long. Don't think I ain't heard you." He patted Kate's shoulder. "Drennan ain't worth you and Dale fightin' over him, one way or 'other. Forget him and—"

"It's not Drennan. It's Dale. If he doesn't know that all life is sharing, he wouldn't know that marriage is sharing, too. He's selfish and stubborn and—"

"You just said all that." Pa got up and went to the door. "I'm goin' out. You kids was all right while there was trouble brewin'. Now that you ain't got trouble, you got to make your own. Don't know when you're in out of the rain, either of you." He opened the door, stopped. "Dale's comin' up now," he said. "Ridin' like the saddle was burnin' under him."

"I won't see him."

Pa waited until Dale came up to the door. He glanced at Dale and then at Kate. "I'll leave you kids alone to battle it out."

"No," Dale said. "You better wait, pa." He crossed the room. "Kate."

She didn't look up.

"We won't be arguing any more, Kate, about selling water to Drennan."

"Dale!" She jumped up. "Oh, Dale. I knew you'd see it my way. I knew if you loved me enough, you'd understand. Dale, I—"

"It's not that. It—" She saw his eyes then. She saw the frown above them that gathered and pulled down hard, the tight worry that edged his lips. "I reckon Drennan's got the last laugh on all of us," he said. "The well diggers were right. The water's dropped to a trickle at the first well. The

water isn't going to last."

"No! It can't be like—"

"Might last a couple of weeks. Maybe a couple of months. Can't tell. But it's going to drain out sure until after winter. I've seen it happen before in a dry spell on the railroad down in Kansas. We're done."

"But what are we going to do?"

"Nothing."

"You . . . you're going to quit?"

Dale's face flushed. "You accused me of that once before and I stuck. I'm not quitting now. There's nothing to quit. The bank has the note and when the well water ends, Drennan will buy us out."

"Maybe it'll rain 'fore then," pa said. "It's got to rain sometime."

"Do Drennan good, but it won't do us much good if it does. Takes a powerful lot of rain to seep through the ground enough to pump it out." Dale put his arms around Kate. He held her close to him. "We'll work it out somehow. You and pa can stay here and I'll get a job again and save up. We'll find some way."

She held him tight. "It's my fault, all of it. If I'd let you sell out to Drennan, we'd have the money. If I hadn't fought with you, we'd be married by now and—"

"We'll be married. That much is sure. That has to be sure, always. It may take a little more time, but—"

"I'll wait, darling. I'll wait forever."

"It ain't none of us at fault," pa said. "It's nothin' human to blame. Only the weather." He flung open the door angrily, shook his fist at the sky. "Dust! It's the breath of the devil, curlin' and witherin' and shrivelin' every livin' thing it touches. Dust! Dust!"

Kate helped Dale pack his things the Tuesday they finally decided. She fought back the tears that misted her eyes and she held the knot while he tied the blanket roll. She took his hand. "No," she whispered fiercely. "I won't let you go. I won't!"

He kissed her gently, the way he had kissed her that night the drill was singing with hope. He put his hands on her shoulders. "We've settled on it, Kate." He tilted up her head and touched his lips to her closed eyes. "Don't look after me. Keep your eyes closed. Pretend you're asleep awhile, darling. And when you wake, we'll be together again."

"I'll be with you all the time. Every minute, Dale." She opened her eyes. "I'm not afraid to see you go. Not now, because I'll be with you."

She went to the corral with him and helped him tie on the blanket roll. He climbed up to the horse and reached down his hand. "I'll be back in a few weeks."

"Sure." She tried just as hard to match his forced smile. "Sure. That's all. Just a few weeks, Dale."

He lifted the reins, wheeled the horse, moved away.

Kate watched him, lifted her

hand to him, kept the smile fixed on. She saw his horse stop. Frowning, she brimmed her eyes with her hand and saw that there were two other riders coming up the road.

Pa. Pa and Drennan!

Quickly, Kate ran down to Dale, met them there.

"Drennan still wants to buy water from us." Pa grinned a bit sheepishly. "I . . . I sort of figured we could use the money."

Kate saw Dale's shoulders stiffen.

"I aim to pay whatever you want," Drennan said. "My steers are dyin'. The stream's down to nothin'. I got to have water. You cain't say 'no' to me again, Austin."

Dale looked at Kate. The hard tightness around his eyes softened slowly. He nodded his head slightly, as though he were remembering everything she had said about sharing.

Then he smiled. It was a tiny smile at first, starting in his eyes. It spread to his lips and became a grin. "We won't sell you any water, Drennan," Dale answered. "But we'll lend you some."

"Lend water?"

"You can water your steers from our wells now in trade for equal water rights to your stream when it gets water back in it. Part of the year, maybe our windmills will be pumping water that has drained through the ground from winter. They'll be pumping when your stream maybe goes almost dry. Part of the year, our wells will go almost dry."

Dale went on talking to Drennan, but he was looking at Kate. "We'll share alike, Drennan. We'll share as neighbors."

Drennan hesitated. He thrust out his hand. "We'll write it down that way."

Dale took Drennan's hand.

It was a beautiful day for the wedding. The weather was just right. Kate and Dale walked out of the church together and stopped on the steps a moment, arms around each other, before they went to the wagon.

Dale helped her up. Behind them in the doorway of the little chapel, pa and Drennan stood chatting together. Neighbors talking together. Dale moved the wagon forward. He put his arm around Kate.

And then it rained.

The rain burst upon them. Slanting spears of rain drenched them, soaked them through. Holding her, Dale began laughing. Kate was laughing, too.

He kissed her and it kept right on raining, just as though they had nothing to do with it. This glorious, wonderful life-giving rain that had been saved for them, saved for today.

THE END.

Humility, thy name was never meant to be woman—and no redblooded hombre'll deny it.

WHAT THEN, SEÑOR REDHEAD?

by Isabel Stewart Way

III.

It was pride alone that carried Manuela through the rest of that long night. Pride that kept her head high and a smile on her lips, as she danced with one partner after another, but never with red-headed Patrick Dennis Callahan.

And at last, night drew to a close. There was a pearly grayness over the eastern mountains that told of dawn, and through the chill of the early hour, Don Fernando and his guests went to the hilltop to watch the start of the herd on the long, dusty trek northward.

It was a great herd, indeed, that was penned in the valley. Four thousand noisy head of cattle were there, restless because they sensed the change ahead. People exclaimed over them. Don Fernando Aguilar eyed them proudly, and Padre Pablo gazed with wistful eyes, as he no doubt thought of the excitement of the journey, but Manuela scarcely saw them.

She was looking only at the lanky, red-headed man who rode so tall in the saddle, seeming to note every move of every beast in the herd, yet never once lifting his gaze to her, though he must know she was there with the others, watching.

Her throat went tight with anger and hurt as she looked at him. "How dare he?" she asked herself fiercely, her hands clenched in the

A Two-part Novel—
Conclusion

folds of her long skirts as her thoughts flew back to the night before. Patrick, holding her in his arms, kissing her, telling her afterward that she didn't know what love was! All because her grandfather had announced her early marriage to her cousin, Felipe Barbosa.

Manuela's dark eyes flashed again as she recalled the hostility in Pat's eyes when she tried to explain. Pat hadn't even tried to understand. And now he was going.

For Padre Pablo had stepped to the very brow of the hill, his hand upraised to bless the herd and the men who journeyed with it.

Manuela bowed her head over folded hands, but she couldn't take her eyes away from that uncovered bowed red head, gleaming so brightly under the first rays of dawn. And, in that moment, all anger drained from her, leaving only the desperate knowledge that her heart would follow Pat, wherever he went.

The blessing ended. The *vaqueros* shouted, rode furiously. The cattle bellowed louder, ran this way and that, resentful and panicky at the change, but gradually the leaders were headed toward the pass that led out of the valley, still bellowing, but straggling into a thin column that seemed endless.

Suddenly, above the clamor, came a shrill scream. The voice of Ana Lopez, who betook her short fat figure to the rim of the hill, screaming, "Benito, I cannot let you go! Always thy roving eye make trouble, and I will not let you leave me!"

Down in the valley, Benito lifted his sombrero and waved to her, but he sent his horse faster, and laughter rose from the hilltop.

"Do not worry, Ana," Padre Pablo said kindly, though his eyes twinkled. "There will be no women on the journey. Thy Benito will be safe."

"Safe also from thy tongue!" chuckled Don Fernando, as he turned back toward the ranchhouse.

The guests followed, for now it was time to go home. The start of the herd marked the end of the great fiesta. Only Manuela stood there, motionless. For, at Ana's scream, Pat had looked up, his gaze coming straight to Manuela's, and she had glimpsed the bleakness in them. She had seen him touch sudden spurs to his horse, as Benito had, and ride a swift circle about the herd.

Somebody touched her shoulder. It was Felipe, his handsome olive-skinned face shining with triumph. "It is time to come home, Manuela. Señor Redhead has gone, and will not return. He told the don this morning that he would take his pay from the gold and go on northward, to the place they call Oregon."

Manuela lifted her head proudly. "He has a sister there. One who is twin to him. This Señora Noreen will of a certainty be glad to see him!"

"You know too much of the affairs of this gringo." Felipe

scowled, and followed her sulkily as she went after the others.

It was while Manuela stood beside her grandfather and Tia Rita, bidding "good-by" to the last of the fiesta guests, that she saw the familiar gray horse passing the El Mirador. Her fingers dug deep into the don's arm.

"The Señor Callahan rides yonder, toward the pueblo. Does he not take the trail, after all?"

For an instant the don's eyes flashed stern warning, then he smiled. "He goes to gather his belongings, little one. At the slow pace of the cattle, he can easily overtake them. We have seen the last of that one!"

"Oh!" and Manuela said no more.

When the last guest had departed, Tia Rita murmured, "The long night is ended. Now we rest," and mutely Manuela followed her to the house.

In her bedroom, she took down her hair, plaited it in two long heavy braids, as if for resting, but she went to the window, took up her vigil, and quietness lay like a blanket over the great house.

"Let them sleep!" she told herself. "When Pat rides past, I'll see him, and there'll be no one to stop me."

She wasn't sure what she'd do. Perhaps she'd just stand quietly and watch him ride out of her life, or, when he looked toward her window, as he surely would, she might fling open the casements and wave at him. And if she did that, no one could know what might happen. The Señor Redhead was impetuous. He might ride into the lane, and she might defy all decency, and go to meet him.

She was still debating when she saw the cloud of dust that told of Pat's coming. Without waiting to see if he turned his head, Manuela reached her arm between the window bars, waved her handkerchief wildly. And it was only the awful lump in her throat that kept her from calling out to him, recklessly.

For Pat was riding straight on. Without even glancing her way, he let his horse canter by, past the gate that led into El Mirador.

For a long moment she watched him, and anger rose like a tide within her. "He dares to treat me in this shameful way!" she whispered, and her hands clenched tight at her sides.

All at once she turned, and dark head high, she slipped softly past Tia Rita's room, though not even a scolding duenna could have stopped Manuela now. Across the patio, through the gate, then swiftly down to the corrals, over a knoll from the house, where the riding horses were kept.

Not a single peon was about, for the servants were asleep, too, after their hard work of the day and night before. Manuela looked about, sighted a thin figure sitting against a tree, head on knees, almost hidden under a giant sombrero. It was Arturo, the son of Benito and Ana.

Running over, Manuela shook

him awake. "Go saddle me a horse, at once!"

He got to his feet, still foggy with sleep. "But señorita—"

"The fastest horse of my grandfather!"

"But señorita," he protested, as he took her fine leather saddle from the tree under the shed, "the fastest—that would be the black stallion! Of such swiftness, only the don can ride him, señorita."

"I can ride any horse, stupid one! But hurry!"

Arturo scurried to do her bidding, held the squealing, high-spirited stallion till Manuela had climbed into the saddle, then sprang to open the gate.

Manuela's boast was not an idle one. The don had taught her to ride superbly, better than most California girls, but this was like riding the wind, she thought, as she bent low over the flying black mane, while the animal went pounding down the olive-bordered lane, then into the dusty trail, over which Pat had ridden such a short while ago.

He was out of sight now. When Manuela topped a hill, she saw him far below, galloping as if he knew she were after him, and wanted to get away.

Manuela let out the tight-held reins. "Faster!" she cried, and the black leaped ahead again.

The wind? It was like riding a whirlwind. Not even the magnificent stallion of Señor Patrick Dennis Callahan could go as fast as this. For Manuela was gaining on him. Then, all at once, she saw him turn in the saddle, look back to see who was coming so swiftly from behind. For an instant he stared, then pulled up his mount so suddenly that it reared to its hind legs.

Manuela pulled on the stallion's reins, realized, with a feeling of horror, that it did no good. She had no control over the animal now. Squealing, snorting, he kept right on, sweeping past Pat, on and on. And the hastily adjusted saddle was slipping, she was sure.

On and on, with the pounding feet of the stallion a din in her ears. She couldn't hold on, but she had to. She closed her eyes, prayed, and then, through the din, she heard Pat's voice right beside her.

"All right, Manuela. Let go!"

There was a moment when Pat was holding her, and she was struggling to free herself from the high horn of the saddle, while her long skirts seemed to wrap themselves fiendishly to hold her. But at last she was free. The black stallion was galloping off, the saddle hanging lopsidedly, and Manuela was held tight against Pat's side.

He stopped his horse, let her slide to the ground, then he got down, caught her in his arms. "You might have been killed," he said huskily. "Oh, Manuela!" He put a finger beneath her chin, lifted her face and looked into it for a long moment before his lips came down on hers.

The kiss ended, she leaned her head against his shoulder, and smiled contentedly as Pat smoothed

back her dark hair.

"Did you follow me, then?" he asked. "Was it that way, Manuela?"

She stiffened. "Did you think I would follow you, señor?"

"I hoped it. When you waved, I hoped you'd been watchin' and would come ridin' after me."

She drew a quick breath, remembering. So he'd seen her waving at him and hadn't deigned to turn his head. She was trembling with anger as she jerked away from him.

"How dare you think I would watch for you? I was teasing Felipe! He"—the words came out recklessly, under the lash of hurt pride—"he is jealous, Señor Redhead. And it pleases me to make him more so!"

"I see!" Pat's face went tight again. "I see better than I ever have before. For a while this mornin', I got to thinkin' maybe I was mistaken, that maybe you did have a mind of your own and knew what you wanted. But now—well, I see!"

They stood there in the hot dusty trail, staring at each other, and it seemed to Manuela as if the earth itself stopped moving.

Then Pat's gaze went past her. He said coolly, "Well, your scheme worked, so I'll be saved the trouble of takin' you home."

She whirled, and there was Felipe riding up to them, his face gray with fury.

"Manuela!" He flung himself down. "What has come over you? To ride out like this, to meet a gringo! To forget yourself—"

"That'll do, fella!" Pat broke in. "You've put up enough of a show. Now take her home!" He put his two hands about Manuela's waist, lifted her up as if she were no more than a feather, and set her upon Felipe's horse. And, without another word, he strode back to his own mount, stepped into the saddle and was off, a rolling cloud of dust, like a speeding devil, marking his trail.

Felipe turned to Manuela, but before he could speak, she ordered, "Take me home at once!" in such imperious tones that he could only obey, trudging sulkily over the hot trail, leading the horse.

Don Fernando was waiting for Manuela by the fountain, his face granite-stern under the mop of his white hair.

"Manuela, what does this mean?" he thundered.

She saw Felipe's smile, and her head jerked up. "It means I wanted to bid *'adios'* to Señor Callahan. And I did."

"The shamelessness of it! My granddaughter, the affianced wife of—"

"No!" she broke in. "I am not the affianced wife of Felipe, not any longer. I will never marry him, not though my life should depend upon it! I do not love him, and—"

"Manuela!" the don roared, but she lifted her voice, went right on.

"I shall marry only the man I love! And he"—in spite of all the hurt she knew, a little lilt ran through her voice as she said the

name. "He is Patrick Dennis Callahan!"

An oath ripped from Felipe's lips, and the don seemed to expand, grow taller, with his wrath. Finally he shouted, "Be still! Mention not that gringo's name in my presence again! I forbid you even to think about him! And now, go to your room and stay till you come to your senses!"

"If that means changing, then I'll grow old and die there! For I'll not stop thinking of Pat, and I'll not marry Felipe!"

The don turned to Tia Rita, who had awakened and come to the door, and his tones were so quiet they frightened Manuela more than his roaring had done.

"Lock the girl in her rooms," he ordered, "and keep her there until she comes forth on her wedding day. Speed the arrangements for the wedding. I will consult with the padre to have it at the earliest date."

Manuela looked about at the three of them, the don, Tia Rita and Felipe, and rebellion blazed in her great dark eyes. Then she turned, walked to her own room, slammed the heavy door and drew the bolt, shutting out the others before they could lock her in.

She walked over to the deep-set casement window, and for the first time, realized that bars across a window, such as all the outside windows had, could make a prison of a room, as well as protect against prowling bandits.

She stared down the road, where Pat had ridden such a short time ago, and her head was very, very high, and her slim figure didn't stir, not for a long, long time.

Manuela had much time for thought through those next three days, and she thought of a lot of things. Sometimes of the past, memories of a moonlight night and a red-headed man, sometimes of the future—impossible dreams that could never become reality. But always, between past and future, her thoughts came to dwell on the present, to seek and plan and find a way.

It was like working in the midst of a great emptiness. Maybe it was because of the empty silence, with the cattle gone, or the empty trail, with no rider coming along it from the pueblo, a redhead, all set to make trouble. Or maybe it was the quietness of her own room, when the rest of the house was bustling with activity.

They were getting ready for her wedding. Manuela smelled the cakes baking, heard the many preparations. And Tia Rita talked from time to time, for the duenna refused to take seriously Manuela's refusal to marry.

"It is maidenly to be thus coy." She smiled brightly. "My Felipe will feel very brave, very proud, to take a bride who is so overcome. And I shall not tell the vain one, *chiquita,* that I know how your heart must thrill at the thought of marrying such a one as my Felipe!"

Manuela shrugged, but when Tia Rita came, with Ana Lopez, to try

on the white satin wedding gown that Manuela's own mother had worn, the girl looked at herself in the mirror, and couldn't bear it. The bridal gown, the veil—they made it seem too real.

Felipe's voice sounded below, calling to his mother, and Tia Rita hurried away. Manuela looked at small fat Ana, and her velvet-dark eyes were stormy.

"Take this off!" she said. And as Ana hastened to unloose the hooks, Manuela pulled the bridal outfit off, tossed it away. "Get it out of my sight!" she flared. "I don't want to see it again!"

Ana picked up the white gown, held it undecidedly. "If I do so, señorita," she said worriedly, "the don will be angered. And already are we of such great trouble! My Arturo—he suffers, for what he does not know."

"Was it because he saddled the horse for me, the other morning?"

Ana nodded. "The don was furious. Arturo must sleep in the stables instead of in his own bed. He cannot touch the horses, only clean the stalls. And myself, señorita, with my Benito gone! Oh, why did I not go with my Benito?"

"Could a woman go on such a journey?" Manuela demanded.

"No, of a certainty!" Ana was hanging up the white gown. "Though I have heard that the gringos bring their women here on the long journey across the plains."

Manuela said slowly, "Yes, they carry their women, or the women follow. I heard of one such—a girl named Noreen." Her eyes flashed under the long lashes, and her slim shoulders straightened. She looked at Ana. "It's too bad you cannot do the same, Ana, knowing how Benito's roving eyes bring him to trouble."

Ana laughed. "But there are no señoritas on the trail, as you well know, *chula mia!*"

"No. But at the end of the journey, Ana, there is a whole pueblo filled with them. A place of much wickedness, known as the Barbary Coast. I heard Tia Rita mention it once to Dona Trujillo. Girls are there, of great beauty and winning ways!"

"Oh!" Ana whispered in horror. "I, too, have heard of that place of wickedness. And my Benito, with his handsome looks, his magnificent manners—"

Manuela's mouth quirked, remembering the homely little brown man, but she answered solemnly, "You have, indeed, much to fear, Ana. Unless you can find a way to follow him, be with him before he arrives and is tempted." She shook her head.

"But what way could be found, señorita?" Ana cried.

Manuela put her hands on the little woman's shoulders. "I will help you, Ana. If you ask no questions, but do as I say, I promise that you will be with Benito before he reaches the so wicked Barbary Coast."

"*Si!*" Ana's round face glowed.

"Only tell me what to do, *chiquita*."

Manuela told her carefully, repeating each step until Ana memorized it. And when the woman had gone, Manuela walked over to the window, looked out through the bars toward the road that Pat had followed. She smiled, dark eyes shining.

"Who knows, Señor Redhead?" she asked pertly.

When Ana brought supper, Manuela seized her arm eagerly. "Well?" she asked, low.

"It is done, señorita. My Arturo—he ask the don to grant him permission to travel to the Mission San Gabriel to work out his penance among the good padres. And the don, he grant the wish. He say also to carry gifts to the mission, but my Benito—"

"Be patient, Ana. That will come. And speak to no one, except to tell my grandfather that I wish to see him."

The don came quickly. "You have come to your senses, little one?" he asked hopefully.

She lowered her lashes demurely. "Perhaps, grandfather. Ana has told me that Arturo goes to the Mission San Gabriel, and I would like permission to take Ana and go also. I would stay with the nuns until my wedding day. I would learn to be a good wife—"

"But from the nuns!" he exclaimed, pulling the neatly pointed whiskers on his chin.

"I mean"—hastily—"I would learn the true spirit of humility, grandfather. I would learn repentance and obedience."

Another moment he looked at her, then his face softened. "Do not become too humble, little one," he said. "Already thou art too good for that Felipe. But perhaps the change will make it easier for you. So go, then, to the mission. Only I cannot trust you to Arturo, and I, myself, cannot leave now. So I will ask Padre Pablo to go with you. He will enjoy visiting the mission, and he can protect you on the way."

"Oh, no!" All at once Manuela knew panic. This wouldn't do at all. It would be easy, with just Arturo, to reach a certain place on the trail and say, "Go on now, *muchacho*! Ana and I leave you here!" But with the padre along—

Then Manuelo remembered the day she'd discovered Padre Pablo at the cockpit, watching the finish of an exciting match. "Ah, little one," he'd sighed then. "Sometimes the man hidden under the priest's robes craves still the adventure this old world offers! If only the two could be more often combined—the office of doing good and the excitement of victory after a good fight!"

She smiled. "Padre Pablo will make fine company. And he can give all the protection we need! May we start tomorrow?"

"*Si*." He nodded, visibly affected. "And may Heaven go with thee!"

"Pat, what is it?" Manuela asked quickly. "Are you not glad that I am here? Don't you understand why I came?"

IV.

They left at dawn, two gift horses for the mission and Padre Pablo's saddled mule tied behind, the cartwheels creaking and stirring protest in Manuela because they turned so slowly.

The day seemed endless as the miles stretched to double-length under the blazing sun. It was mid-afternoon when they came, at long last, to the new trail that crossed the old, the new trail, made by the plodding hoofs of four thousand cattle and the horses of the men who rode them.

"Ah, what a sight it must have been, no later than yesterday," the padre sighed, "to see the great herds pouring across this road!"

"*Si!*" Manuela nodded. Then, "Arturo, we stop here! Help me down, then put saddles on the two gift horses sent by the don. Ana, the food and the package I gave you last night. Quickly, Arturo!" as the lad pulled to a stop, gazing, mouth open.

Manuela turned to the padre. "From here, father, Ana and I follow the herd, while Arturo goes on to the mission. You may choose your route, but you are needed with us. Needed greatly, padre, to give one of the holy sacraments."

He stared his surprise. "Which holy sacrament, child?"

Manuela lowered her lashes, thinking of Pat, the redhead who might be shocked into receiving her happily, or who might still be hostile. Her hands clenched.

"He may be needing the last rites, father," she said softly.

He looked down at her for a long time, then he spoke gently. "Perhaps I do wrong, but I will go along. I cannot let you go alone, child!" But his eyes were eager as he went around to make ready his mule.

A dusty, hot trail the cattle had followed, rising and dipping over one sand dune after another, winding among spiny cacti and pungent sagebrush. The sun beat its slanting rays down fiercely, and the earth reflected the heat. Manuela's skin felt burned by the alkali dust when Padre Pablo, ahead now, suddenly pulled up.

"They camped there last night," he said, pointing to a small arroyo, still dust-hazy.

Ana wiped her grimy face with a sleeve and croaked, "Oh, oh! May we also not make camp? Weariness picks at my bones like a thousand crows, and I would that my Benito had never been born!"

"How far ahead do you think they are, padre?" Manuela asked.

"They travel slowly," he said, "so that the fat will not be melted from the herd. About seven miles ahead is the creek of Santa Ynez, where there is grass and trees. Surely, they will camp there tonight."

"Then we'll follow." Manuela nodded, and they started on again, through miles that seemed even longer, hotter and drearier, because of the dread that was rising in Manuela—dread of what she would see in Pat's eyes when he saw her.

The short twilight came and

went. They rode into the dust cloud, still left from the herd's passing, and felt the first cool shadows of night. They saw the moon come up, throwing squat shadows of cacti, making the desert an eerie place.

And then, at last, they heard the sound of the cattle, becoming loud suddenly, to show they were at the arroyo of Santa Ynez Creek.

Manuela felt herself tremble as they stopped and looked down from the rock rim, upon the dark huddle of the cattle and the campfire among the great live oaks. Pat was down there. In another few minutes she would meet him, would see either joy spring into his eyes, at sight of her, or the same bleak hostility that had been there before.

"Oh!" Ana exclaimed from beside her. "My Benito—I do not see him! Perhaps he has gone roving."

"We will soon see." The padre laughed, and sent his mule ahead down the trail.

Manuela followed the other two, but when they neared the bottom, she felt, all at once, as if she had to get it over with, so she sent her horse past the others and rode swiftly down the trail and along the arroyo.

She saw the startled *vaqueros* leap to their feet. She heard Ana call shrilly from behind her, "Benito, my little man! It is I, Ana, thy wife!" and Benito's loud *"Por dios!* Is a man to have no peace?" But he took her in his arms.

Then Manuela saw Pat before her, his red head shining under the moonlight, his face tender and gentle.

"Manuela!" he breathed. "You're here. It's not a dream!"

"Yes, Pat!" she whispered, holding out her hands. "I followed you, Pat. I . . I had to follow you."

"Yes. Yes, little Manuela." Still in that gentle voice.

He took her hands for a moment, held them tightly before he dropped them to grasp the bridle reins and lead her horse over to the shelter of a great oak. Here he lifted her down, set her gently on her feet.

Manuela's dark head dropped to his shoulder, and he lifted his hand, stroked her hair tenderly, while she waited for his arms to go about her and jerk her close to him, while she waited for his lips to seek hers.

But Pat didn't take her in his arms. When she looked up, she saw that his face was tight with some sort of strain, and there was a great sadness in his blue eyes.

"Pat, what is it?" she asked. "Are you not glad, then? Can you not understand, my very dear? I came, as your sister followed the man she loved, because I could not live without you, Pat. Do you not know that?"

"Yes, darlin'," he said, low, moving back a little to put his hands upon her shoulders and look down into her face. "I know. And it's all my fault, tellin' you that story of Noreen. I guess maybe I've

been expectin' you, Manuela."

"*Si*, Pat. You knew I would come," she whispered.

"Knew it, but kept hopin' you wouldn't."

"Oh!" she gasped, and drew a little away.

His hands held her. "Don't get angry, darlin'. It wasn't because I didn't love you that I hoped you wouldn't come. It was because I loved you, knowin' how I'd ache to hold you in my arms when I saw you, knowin', too, how hard it would be to send you back!"

"But you can't! I won't go back. Do you still not understand? I have told my grandfather that I will marry none but you! I have left my home for you, Pat!"

"And you must go back," he said, very low, very tense.

Manuela looked up into his face and knew terror, a great fear that drained the blood from her face, from her heart. Pat looked so quietly determined. She could find no words to batter down that wall, so she stood there, wide-eyed, mute, until he spoke again:

"It's this way, Manuela. I was a fool back there. I went sort of crazy when your grandfather told about you and Felipe Barbaso, and I took it out on you. You had a right to be angry, when I didn't understand. I told myself you didn't know what love was, but I was wrong, darlin'. These past four days, Manuela, hearin' the El Mirador *vaqueros* speak of you as if you were a princess, which you are, my sweet, and gettin' the true picture of how you've been reared—well, I've been comin' to my senses realizin' that you loved me, but that I had no right to you."

"No right to me, Pat? But you said you loved me!"

"I do love you, Manuela. I always will. But I'm only a man who works hard for a livin', and probably always will. Even though I get the homestead I've been plannin' on, and build a home, I'll still be workin' hard to hold it. And I couldn't give you a quarter part of what you've been used to, of what's your right, darlin'. So I'm sendin' you back, tomorrow."

"No!" She beat at him in her panic. "I won't go! Can't you see? I won't! I can't!"

He caught her hands, held them. Then he bent and kissed her forehead. "Good-by, Manuela!" he whispered, and turned, raised his voice, "Padre Pablo!"

When the priest was there, he pushed Manuela toward him. "You will take her back tomorrow, padre. And try to make her understand that I'm doing the only thing I can do, in my love."

The padre nodded, his kindly face filled with pity. "She may not understand until she is quite old, but you, my son, I am glad you have discovered it. Without her grandfather's consent, cut off from all her people, the marriage would have held too much of hurt for our Manuela. I was sure that your heart would lead you wisely, Patrick, and she had to find out from you."

Pat strode away then, and Manu-

ela faced the priest, her head high, her voice sounding like that of someone already dead. "Even when I am very old, I shall not believe what you and Pat say," she told him. "And I shall never forgive either of you!"

Manuela did not speak again, because there were no words great enough to carry the heartache she knew. In silence, she went with Ana to the camp Pat had fixed for her, a tarpaulin stretched over a bent sapling. Lying down, she stared through the opening out into the night, chill and dark.

She didn't think or plan; she was too benumbed for that. She just lay there, her thoughts sending out little tendrils, to cling to snatches of remembrance. The first time she had seen Pat, there in her grandfather's patio. The flashing way he'd smiled, the way, later, he'd placed Tia Rita in a chair and told her to rest, while he talked to Manuela.

Always Manuela smiled at that memory, but her lips were rigid as she recalled the other times when Pat had looked at her so bleakly. How could it all be the same man? The redhead who held her in his arms and said he loved her, and the man with the tenderly stern eyes who said, "You must go back!"

Manuela wasn't sure just when her staring eyes caught the shadow moving down the hillside. She might never have been fully conscious of seeing it, if a vagrant shaft of faint moonlight had not outlined for an instant the figure against a big white boulder. A tall, slim figure.

Manuela sat up, her mind going quickly over the *vaqueros* of her grandfather. None were as tall as this one. And the padre—he would cast a fuller shadow in his robes. It was Pat. It could be none other than the redhead.

Manuela got up, crawled out of the shelter, then moved like a small, swift shadow toward that white boulder. She wasn't sure just why she went—she only knew that she had to speak once more with Pat, to plead once again for the right to happiness.

Yes, she would do even that. She, Manuela, granddaughter of the don, would humble herself and beg this man to accept her love. And she would do it with her head held proudly high. For Manuela had learned that nothing on earth was as valuable as love, because nothing in all the world held any value without it.

She came to the boulder. "Pat!" she called softly. "Pat, I saw you here. I—"

She stopped as the tall shadow loomed suddenly before her, and a scream rose from her throat as she realized that this was not Pat, but an *Indita*, a strange, half-naked Indian who had no part with the men who helped guard the El Mirador herd.

But the scream was muffled so quickly that it lingered on the air as no more than the call of a night bird, by the Indian's grimy hand across her mouth. His other arm imprisoned her, held there as his

lips gave a low whistle that was probably a signal.

Comprehension flashed through Manuela's thoughts as she struggled there in his tight grasp. These were Indians from the mountains, come to prey upon her grandfather's great herd. Savages they were, probably led by some of the renegades who had at one time been mission Indians, but had fled back to their own, using all they had learned for evil purposes.

Often they came down, in small droves, to plunder the mission herds and flocks, and this time—

She thought of Pat, of Benito and the others. Taken by surprise, they'd have no chance in the fight, but that would not stop Señor Redhead. Her grandfather's cattle had been put into his keeping, and Pat would fight until he was overpowered, perhaps killed.

She struggled harder, gave another choked cry. Only a faint one, but it was answered. Pat's voice, quick, urgent and close. "Manuela!"

He came upon them, and didn't seem to pause even for a moment before he had taken it all in. He leaped, his fist lashing out, and Manuela felt herself falling as the *Indita* let her go to face Pat.

She screamed loudly then, seeing the other shadows swarming down from the hillsides upon them, Indians who crowded about Pat. They wore no guns, she saw, but they began lashing at him, pounding him, all in that deadly awful silence. And she screamed still again when she saw a knife blade catch moonlight as it was uplifted in the air.

Manuela came to her feet, leaped toward Pat in almost a single gesture. Her body, slim and slight as it was, sent an *Indita* backward, throwing Pat off balance, and the knife blade creased his arm instead of entering his back.

Other copper-colored arms snatched her back and away, held her. The knife went up again and Manuela's heart stopped beating as she saw Pat standing there, one against so many, for there were at least a score against him, with that knife about ready to come down.

But the knife didn't descend. One of the Indians gave a hoarse cry, pointed to the *vaqueros* coming toward them. They were armed, and Benito lifted his gun, but another voice spoke firmly:

"Put down the gun, Benito. We will have no bloodshed!" and Padre Pablo strode to the front of them, walked right up to the group near the boulder.

"You, Dominguez, throw that knife to the ground!" he thundered.

The Indian scowled, hesitated, then threw the knife at the padre's feet, sullenly. The priest picked it up, went on sternly:

"And you, Ramon, Aden, Pedro! You who have turned from the path of good to walk with evil! You would have stolen the fat cattle of Don Fernando, the cattle which do not belong to you. Come forward and confess yourselves, and be given penance for your sins!"

A little hesitation, then one Indian

walked forward, fell to his knees before the padre, another until the four were there. Seeing them like this seemed to put fear into the hearts of their followers, for as quickly and as silently as they had come, they slipped away and disappeared up the side of the arroyo.

Manuela saw then, that Pat was on his feet, and that his sleeve was soaked with scarlet.

"Pat—oh, Pat!" she cried, and ran over to him. "Padre Pablo, come quickly, before his life drains away! Benito, do something to help. Ana!"

Pat grinned at her as he let his long body slip to the ground, to lean against the big boulder. "Shows how a jasper in love goes a mite loco!" he said. "Saw you comin' up here, and didn't even wait to get my guns before I followed. And I guess, Manuela, I guess I can't let you go, ever, after all."

"I'll never leave you!" she cried, so vehemently that Pat grinned again, before consciousness left him for a time.

Morning found Pat's bedroll in the shade of a tree, near the thread of a creek, that the sound of the cool water might help the fever that held him. Ana had gone in search of more fresh leaves to bind the wound, and Manuela was keeping watch beside the redhead, when the two horses rode down into the arroyo.

It was Don Fernando Aguilar, riding as straight as if he had just climbed into the saddle, though Felipe Barbosa, just behind him, slumped low in weariness.

The don stopped his horse near Manuela, stepped down. "One of the mission *Inditas* warned that renegades would plunder our herd last night, and we've ridden constantly, fearing for your safety, child! It is well with thee?"

She nodded. "I am safe, and your cattle also, thanks to Patrick Dennis Callahan! He risked his life for me, grandfather, and"—her voice broke—"for that he may die."

Her grandfather came over, put his hand upon her head. "I am thankful that you are spared, *chulita*. When I heard of the danger—"

"You knew I was here? With Pat?"

He nodded. "Tia Rita found your wedding gown missing only two hours after your departure, so Felipe and I rode to the mission, found Arturo, and came."

She faced him bravely. "I cannot go back with you, grandfather. I am going with Pat, even though"—her voice broke a little—"he says he will not take me. I will not wed with Felipe."

The don's dark eyes flicked to Felipe, who had already stretched himself on the grass, a little way off, groaning in his weariness. "No, you will not wed with that one," he agreed surprisingly, and she caught somthing like contempt in his voice. "Not such a brave one is Felipe that I should wish him to father my grandsons! We will find him another wife. And you, my Manuela—"

He looked down at Pat. Manuela's gaze followed his, saw that Pat's blue eyes were open, the fever

gone from them. He said simply, "I have nothing to offer her, sir, but my love, and the work of my hands."

The don nodded. "There will be much work for your hands. You have saved my cattle, as well as my granddaughter, so half the herd is yours! I will need you greatly, after you have recovered, at El Mirador. I am sending Felipe and Padre Pablo, who wishes it, on to San Francisco."

He started away, and Manuela turned to Pat. But not quite yet was she to be alone with him, for the padre was there. "Look, my child," he said, "you told me there would be somebody here needful of one of the holy sacraments. Before you start back, perhaps you will tell me who is in need."

She lifted her head high, laughed. "The package, Ana, bring it! With my wedding dress, and my grandfather here, it shall be the sacrament of marriage, Padre Pablo!"

So Manuela was married under the oak tree in her mother's wedding gown, and Pat gazed at her with all the love in the world, during the poignantly sweet ceremony.

THE END.

ONLY LOVELINESS ENDURES

Always the changeless mountains stand,
Lifting their snow-capped peaks up to the sky,
Always the changeless stars above the land,
Generously beam their lights to passersby—
Let us hold tryst with every lovely gift,
Bestowed on earth and growing through all time,
Let us keep faith with faith, and proudly lift
Hopes high as they march with us up the climb—
Let us remember and make very sure:
Not to forget that lovely things endure.

GRACE MEREDITH.

A STORM IS A-BREWIN'

by Garrison K. Rumford

You'd a-thought any jasper with the larnin' about weather forecastin' that Gabriel had, woulda catched wise to lightnin' flashes in a gal's eyes.

GABRIEL NEWTON, the meteorologist, took off his glasses. In the first place, the weather was so hot that perspiration was misting them a little. In the second place, it had just occurred to him that he might be able to kiss Fern Travis. To kiss a girl with your glasses on is something like kissing her with your hat on, Gabriel was thinking, though his mind, at the moment, was almost as befogged as his glasses. Fern always affected him that way.

She stood directly in front of him now, and so close that her crisply starched blue cotton shirt almost touched him. Her lovely gray eyes were level with his. They were of equal height, though his shoulders were half again as broad. Meteorology is a learned profession, but not a sedentary one. A man who must study weather from the icy Aleutian Islands to the torrid Gulf of Tehuantepec has to be right strong physically.

Fern smiled tantalizingly. "Well, Sir Isaac?"

If she expected, or wanted, to be kissed that was the wrong thing to say. Gabriel's name was Newton, yes, like that of the famous scien-

tist. But his first name was, distinctly, not Isaac.

So he missed his big chance by gulping, "Gup . . . er . . . Fern—glad to see you!"

Her welcoming smile vanished. She stepped back a pace to pat the nose of the chunky sorrel cayuse he had ridden up the canyon. "Glad to see you, Gabe, too. Did you come up from L. A. on the rattler, or did you ride Pesky here"—stroking the pony's withers—"all the way?"

Gabriel was a scientist, a matter-of-fact young man who often failed to perceive when humor was intended. "Pesky," he pronounced, "is rugged, my dear, but not quite rugged enough for a two-hundred-mile trip when there is a serious weather disturbance impending. I rode . . . er . . . the rattler to Payoff, down yonder, as I usually do. See" —he pointed far below—"the up train must be late again. My train is still at the depot."

From Fern's chicken ranch, far up a hidden canyon of the High Sierras, a magnificent view could be had of all the country beneath. The tiny town of Payoff, microscopic in size from that distance, was still clearly discernible under its pleasant grove of cottonwood trees. Vision carries far in the thin air of the open West. Tiny wisps of snowy steam puffed from the sidetracked locomotive.

"Well, pardner, come in and sit down," Fern invited dryly. "Or make yourself comfortable on the bench by the screen door. I'm canning chickens for the winter, and it's hotter'n Death Valley inside. I have to keep my pressure cooker at a temperature of 255 degrees at this altitude, you know—17, on the dial, that is. Thank goodness, you understand that. There's some good in being a scientist."

Such equivocal praise was something, at least. Gabriel was inured to being compared rather unfavorably with the more rugged citizens of the West—slim, wiry cowhands, burly mining men. Fern's father had lived and died a prosperous stockman. Gabriel was aware that a thing called a meteorologist must be, to any ranch girl, a pretty queer sort of creature. It was some consolation, if rather pallid consolation, that she did give him credit for brains. "To be sure," he agreed, "the higher the altitude, the higher the cooking temperature necessary. The pressure cooker principle—"

"Iced tea or iced coffee, Gabe?" Fern, from inside the screen door, interrupted his unappreciated scientific speculation. Despite the heat of the day, outdoors and in, the girl, in crisp shirt and clean blue jeans, seemed to keep beautifully cool.

"Too cool, all the time," Gabriel growled to himself.

"What did you say, dear?"

Dear! Well, now— Gabriel half rose from his bench. But, shucks, in her big-hearted way, Fern called everybody dear, from the old swamper of the Payoff Palace Hotel to the withered Mex crones of the dobe huts. "I said"—the young scientist restrained himself—"that the isotherms seem to indicate—"

"Tea" Fern said flatly, "or coffee? Make up your mind, mister." She

was obviously in no mood this afternoon for a lecture on diurnal variations and solar constants.

"Tea."

Gabriel got up from the shaded bench on the small stoop, and moved out to where he could see the whole sweep of the horizon. There wasn't a cloud, the whole sky was a brassy blue. Hot—too hot and heavy. He came back, up the one step to the stoop, as the girl appeared with a big pitcher of iced tea, sprigged with slips of mint.

. "Thanks, honey," Gabriel said, relieving her of the pitcher and setting it down on the bench. "But, seriously, dear, there's some mighty bad weather brewing. Your place isn't too safe here, so low on the slope of the canyon. If—"

"Oh, bother," the girl laughed. "There's no danger from lightning here. With all these mineralized buttes around us, lightning is drawn to them like . . . like—"

"Like . . . like I am to you," Gabriel managed to get out, quite surprisingly for him. Something, maybe the heavy, tense atmosphere of the air, had stirred him unwontedly. He managed to get hold of both her hands, and holding them in his, to draw them up against his own chest, so that they stood as close together as they had at first greeting.

"Listen," he persisted, with rising boldness in the exhilaration of the feeling of even such a trifling contact with her. "Listen, darling, I wasn't speaking of lightning. Nor, so long as you don't seem to care for the subject, am I going to talk about weather."

"No?" The tone was incredulous. But the girl's cheeks were suddenly more deeply flushed than they had been in the excessive heat of her kitchen. She wondered just what was the matter with her. She knew she liked this man, liked him better than anyone else she'd known. But he was so—well, funny, or—

"No," said Gabriel Newton, still holding her hands against him so close that she could sense his steady heartbeat. "Weather be damned, for a minute."

His first "damn," Fern realized. Why, what was coming?

It came fast enough, virtually an eruption. "I wanna marry you." Emotion was slightly blurring his usually precisely correct speech. "I wanna marry you, Fern darling. An' live . . . and live with you always. Now— No, don't interrupt. Listen. The government is sending me, first, clear up to Vancouver, then all the way down the coast, Seattle, Portland, Eureka, Monterey, Santa Barbara, clear into lower California. I've got a liberal expense account. I've saved some money, Fern. So . . . so what a wedding trip that would be, darling!"

"Why, Gabriel dear, I . . . I—"

Her lovely gray eyes were looking into his eyes with an expression he never had seen in them before. There was a depth of earnestness, of gentleness, in her eyes. Their lips were on a level. He sensed the slight trembling of her arms.

Gabriel Newton quite forgot that public opinion, even, possibly, Fern's

opinion, esteemed him to be nothing but a sedentary scholar. He couldn't throw a lariat, work in a roundup crew, onkink a salty bronco. Gabriel even forgot that he had news of an ominous weather change pending.

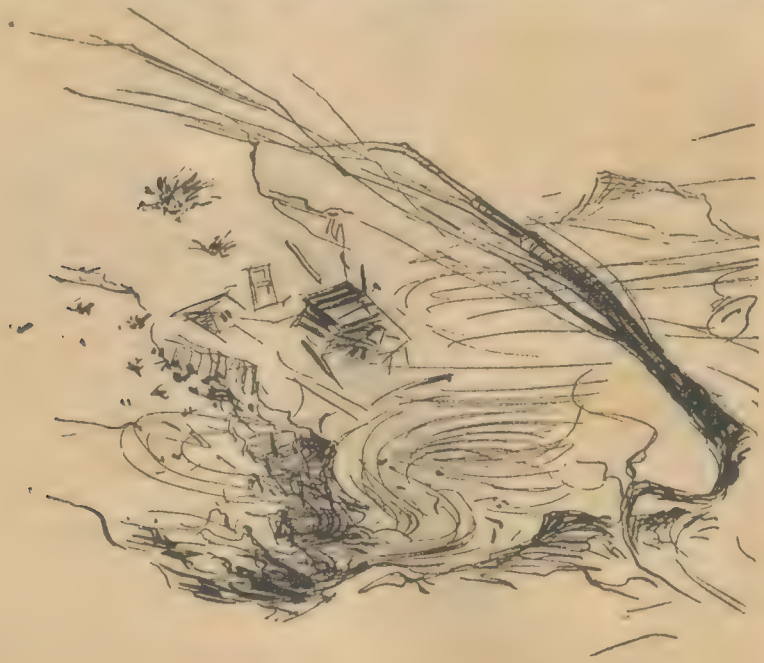
He knew only that this girl, beautiful, sentient, warm, almost acquiescent, was close here in front of him. He was lifted far off his normal plane of dry mathematical precision. The girl's hands were dropped, as the man's arms went close about her lithe, unresisting body.

And a shrill, hissing whistle vibrated right behind them.

"Dammit!" Fern whirled free. "The dratted cooker's too hot!" She was through the screen door and into the kitchen instantly.

Gabriel gaped, staggered at the suddenness of the interruption. The thing had all the shock and summons of a police whistle. It was exactly as if that pestilential petcock, on the safety valve of the pressure cooker inside, had appointed itself an inanimate guardian of ethics.

But the heavy pressure cooker, with its freight of seven glass jars jammed tight with freshly boned chicken meat, had to be moved from the stove. Gabriel was mechanical-minded enough to know that, if the heat went up a trifle higher, the super-safety plug of the petcock would blow out. Then it might be months before another plug could be



supplied by mail order from the manufacturer in the East, and meanwhile the pressure cooker would be useless.

And when the heavy cooker had been moved to the far edge of the stove, so that the dial showed its temperature well beneath the safety mark, Fern's emotional moment seemed to have cooled, like her cooking. She was, so quickly, again the strictly sensible, coolly capable boss of a brood of profitable and expensive Barred Rock chickens.

They had barely reached the hilltop when the rain hit, with an appalling smash that knocked the pony to its knees. Directly below, the canyon foamed with white water.

"But," she did avow, "do come on back, in a couple of hours, for supper, dear."

"We can go on . . . er . . . then from . . . er . . . where we were, Fern?"

A smile, mischievous, almost, was the enigmatic answer. "I don't know, Gabriel. I—"

"And our honeymoon?"

"Yes, it would be a nice trip," agreed that exasperating woman.

"Nice trip!" Gabriel muttered dismally, as he swung himself aboard the flat saddle of his cayuse Pesky. That flat Saumur saddle he used was another point against Gabriel Newton, for all he was an excellent horseman. "Sets on a dude's kak, aw-haw!" the local cowhands jeered.

"Yeah, nice trip!" he continued to moan, as he slowly started the descent of the steep canyon. "Oh, my gawsh!" He saw, through blurred spectacles, the sun-drenched village of Payoff far below, the train still puffing on its siding.

So near had the fulfillment of all his longing been—so far away, it seemed, it had fled! A couple of hours, indeed! By that time his sweetheart would be as cool again as the pitcher of iced tea which stood untouched behind him.

Fern meantime mused, "A couple of hours! Well, maybe, who knows—"

She did not have to await the answer for a couple of hours. It came with dramatic urgency.

Battering hoofs came banging up the loose shale and schist of the canyon. Fern whipped one glance at the cooker's dial—again it was too close to the danger mark of 17—and then she was out on the stoop.

Gabriel, to be sure, it was, and for once, spurring his bronc, regardless. His hat and glasses were gone. He pulled his cayuse so hard that the pony sat back on its haunches.

"Come out o' there, and quick! Get away from that house," Gabriel yelled as he battled his panicked sorrel, which was utterly unused to any such rodeo handling. "Up the hill! Up the hill, darling!"

"Gabriel Newton, are you plumb loco, you loon?"

"Up the hill, I say!" He got Pesky under control and wheeled in close to the girl, who stood there slightly above the level of the ground on the porch step. "Run, honey, run!"

"And leave all my canning to burn up? Why, you're loco, Gabe."

Fast action, summary and swift, ended her expostulation. Gabriel had leaned far out of his saddle, and his right arm had snapped her clear off the porch step and swept her close against him.

Fern fought to free herself, managed to get both hands into his thick, brown, wavy hair, and yanked. "You let me go. You—"

Then all the fight went out of her, and all the breath, too, as she was slammed down flat on her stomach across the pony's withers. A hard hand in the small of her back relentlessly pinned her there as, lunging under its double load, the

cayuse charged straight up the canyon's side.

For the moment, all Fern's attention was engaged in keeping her face from being smacked against the horse's left forequarter. She warded this off with her hands as best she could. What did this fool man of hers think that he was doing—trying to be some sort of a mythological centaur, kidnaping a helpless gal?

She tried to slide from the sorrel's neck. But her weight was not evenly balanced; she hung too far down over the nigh forequarter. If she went off head first into sharp schist and jagged rocks, she'd be severely hurt, surely. She was taking a brutal battering as it was. Still—

She heard Gabriel's voice dimly, as if from far, far away, instead of immediately above her. "Hear? See?"

An awful, roaring thunder cannonaded down the canyon. No wonder a human voice could scarce be heard in that din. The roar was continuously rising.

Then the rain hit, with an appalling smash that knocked the pony to its knees, and stunned both the humans it carried. The pony staggered up again, but man and girl went rolling, she tightly wrapped in his arms. They lodged, two rods away, against the lucky outcrop of a limestone boulder.

Fern found herself free. She sat up, shielding her head with her arms against the storm's savage assault. A hundred feet below her, the canyon foamed with white water. Sagebrush and tumbleweed, gnarled, uprooted piñon trees bounced along the stream's surface.

Fern's eyes followed the flood. Down yonder, by her cabin, there was a gusty flurry of grayish-black as the strongest of her poultry flock winged away from the danger. Then the maelstrom of the flood lapped up to her house, lifted it as if it had been no more than a hen house, tumbled and tossed it to fragments. The tide of the torrent swept on downward relentlessly.

"Cloudburst!" came a husky croak under Fern's left elbow. "Guessed she was comin'."

"Oh, Gabe darling, you all right?" Her hands went down to raise his head and turn his face so that she could see it.

"Never felt better in my life," averred that stocky young scientist. He hitched up onto one elbow. "I figured that cloudburst was due, dear. Meant to tell you when I first came up this afternoon, but . . . uh—" He was suddenly mute. To his immense surprise, he was being thoroughly kissed by a lady who cascaded water all over him.

Too soon, so Gabriel thought, the drenching cloudburst ended. The downpour dissipated itself into a gentle drizzle.

Fern drew away slightly, not very far away, at that. "Why . . . ah . . . darling," she stammered, "I d-didn't exactly realize ju-just what I was doing. I . . . I guess I was knocked half-conscious."

"Stay half-conscious then," returned Gabriel crisply, "and let me have my innings."

The setting sun blazed out, hotter than ever, it seemed. Pesky, ambling down the side of the canyon, was carrying double again. But this time the second rider sat ladylike behind the man in the saddle, and with no unwilling arm around him, retained her seat securely.

They neared the village of Payoff, only two segments of which remained. The torrent of the cloudburst had sliced right through the town's center. The railroad depot had vanished—water tower, semaphore, ticket office, platform, even railway ties and tracks didn't exist any more.

"Honeymoon's delayed again." Gabriel surveyed the havoc. "I'd hoped the train would still be here. Wonder what happened to it?"

"There's a big crowd yonder"—Fern pointed—"where the first curve dips down."

Pesky was pushed to a fox trot.

But when the first curve of the down grade was reached there was no vestige of any train, either cars or locomotive. Instead, an avalanche of mud, trees, rocks, the shattered planking of buildings, had been caught there and completely clogged the narrow mouth of the canyon.

"What happened to the train, Squint?" called Fern, spotting Payoff's postmaster.

"They're a-diggin' for 'er now," Squint explained obligingly.

Gabriel Newton gasped. "If you'd gone off with me on that train, Fern—"

"Oh, all the folks got off," assured Squint. "Most is up yon on the hill, a-feared to come down yet. Tenderfoots." The postmaster paused, assaying the significance of the bronc's double burden. "So you two was a-fixin' to get married up, eh, Fern?"

"Still fixin'," Gabriel allowed. "Even if we do have to walk clear down to the San Joaquin Valley."

THE END.

Dave's gal was waitin' for him all right, just like he expected, only it took some highjackin' for him to recognize her.

ONE ARIZONA NIGHT

by C. S. Montanye

THE sun was setting, warm and red, over the sage. Dave Hammel rode the borrowed mare past the first of the empty pastures and down the overgrown lane. He hitched her to the last rail and walked slowly up to the small, shuttered house close to the weather-bleached barns.

It was all the same. A little unkempt from lack of occupancy, but just as he had left it three years ago. The tiny ranchhouse needed paint, so did the barns and, Dave saw, a lot of the fencing would have to be repaired if he decided to carry on where he had left off.

That, of course, depended on Cathie. Maybe she wouldn't want to stay in Gunniston when they were married. Cathie had always dreamed of big cities, people, life. He remembered how often she had told him she wished Dad Crosby would sell the Quarter Circle and move east.

Dave sat down on the top porch step. On the Diamond E he had bred the quarter horses that were making Arizona famous. Small, tough, speedy stock that had begun to replace the old Spanish type horse that had so ably served the cattlemen of the Southwest so many years.

These compact, blocky little animals were exceptionally fine cutting

and working material. Quick on their feet, with a big burst of early speed, Dave had found that the quarter horse had a large advantage in herding cattle. Experimentation had told him that the stock he raised didn't need to be pampered, that it was intelligent, responded to training easily, and ranked among the best in the West for an all-around cow horse.

The week before he had left Gunniston, exchanging the Diamond E for the marine task force and the South Pacific, Dave had auctioned off all his stock. Most of it carried the famous blood of Peter McCue. It would be hard to replace and it would take a lot of time getting started again, though that didn't matter so much. He was young. All he needed was a good stallion and a few proven mares.

The chug of an approaching car broke his thoughts. He got up. A small flivver, covered plentifully with range dust, passed the mare Dave had borrowed from Sheriff Warner. The car stopped and, in the gathering twilight, Dave saw a girl get out.

She was small, with quick, animated movements. She wore a riding skirt and silk blouse, still bright in the half light. She stood there for a minute, looking from the mare at the hitching rail to the house.

Then she came up the path and Dave, when he saw her copper-colored hair, recognized her.

"Madge!"

Cathie Crosby's kid sister hurried toward him.

"Dave! It isn't—it just can't be!"

"But it is!"

She tumbled into his arms, all excited, laughing a little, crying a little. Her soft, fluffy hair brushed his tanned cheek. In their swift, impulsive embrace, he was conscious of the change three years had made. When he had left, Madge had been a skinny, gangling kid.

Now, as Dave held her off and looked at her, he saw she had become lovely. All the awkward angles seemed to have molded with maturity into soft curves, feminine and intriguing. The hair she used to wear in braids was like a bronze flame. Her eyes, wide and excited, were a shade darker than Cathie's, a smoky-gray behind thick, dark lashes. And her mouth, he noticed, was warm and red.

"Cathie doesn't know you're here?" There was a fascinating, husky note in her voice. "She got your letter from San Francisco, when you were discharged. You didn't say you were coming so soon. What do you plan to do, surprise her?"

Dave sat down again on the top step. He pulled Madge Crosby down beside him. In the vague, twilight dark, her eyes were like twin stars.

"That's what I want to do, surprise Cathie. Any suggestions?"

Madge looked up at him. "There's a dance tonight at the Town Hall, for our local Red Cross chapter. We're both going and . . . and—" Her voice trailed away, her expression changing.

Dave noticed that and frowned. "And what?"

"You'd better stop in later." Then, animated again, she asked, "Where are you going to stay? You said something in your letter about a friend of yours. Did you bring him along?"

Dave shook his head. "I guess you mean Ray Wilcox. He's coming at the end of the week. I'm staying," he told her, "at the Ace Hotel for a while. Until I make up my mind whether to go back into business or sell the Diamond E."

"Sell?" Her shoulder touched his. "After all this time we've waited for you to come back, Dave?"

"It'll depend on Cathie, what she wants me to do."

"Oh!" Her voice trailed off again.

Dave leaned close to her. "How is she, Madge?"

"Cathie?" The starry eyes met his. "She's all right. Cathie's always all right. Just the same as when you left her."

She seemed to be on the point of adding something, and thought better of it. Madge got up. His arm around her, Dave walked down the weedy lane to her dusty car.

"How come you drove down here instead of taking the range trail to the Quarter Circle?"

"Once in a while I cut through," she said carelessly, a trifle too carelessly. "Just like to keep an eye on your spread, see if everything's all right."

"That's darn sweet of you, Madge."

She shrugged as she climbed in under the wheel. "I don't see that it is, particularly. I mean, you were out there doing your share, so why shouldn't I see that everything's all right at home?"

"Town Hall tonight." Dave rested a big foot on the running board. "And no telling Cathie that I'm back."

"Not a word," she promised, and started the car.

Dave stood and watched it round the fencing beyond the barns. Its red tail light winked out in the distance. He drew himself up and squared his shoulders. Cathie's kid sister, all grown up! And it seemed only yesterday he was helping her with her school work, wondering why she pestered him with it. Why she had to come to the Diamond E, when he was busy, with a lot of silly arithmetic problems.

It was altogether dark now.

Dave turned the mare back to Gunniston. Anticipation began to create an expectancy within him. A dance at the Town Hall. Cathie again. Cathie in his arms, after three lonely years, her kiss warm and sweet! He breathed harder as he touched the mare's sleek flank with his boot heel.

Sheriff Hank Warner was in his office at the end of town when Dave put the mare in her stall in the barn behind the house. Warner, a wrinkled, weathered, middle-aged man, was sorting through a sheaf of subpoenas when Dave let the screen door bang behind him.

The sheriff turned around in his creaking swivel chair. He brushed his mustache back, a gesture Dave

remembered well. Warner shoved his ten-gallon hat back on his gray head and grinned.

"Find everything O.K.?" When Dave nodded, he hooked a brass cuspidor closer with a foot and aimed accurately. Then he wiped his mouth on the back of a leathery hand. "You'd better start raisin' hosses again. Demand's good and the supply's poor. Get all the breedin' stock you want from the Southern Arizona Horse Breeders' Association up at Tucson."

"I'll think about it. It all depends." Dave didn't explain further. Instead, he changed the subject. "How are things in town, Hank? Quiet and peaceful-like?"

"Heck, no!" Warner cleared his throat violently. "Been havin' a mess of trouble with some newcomers. Sports from Chicago. Bad hombres, Dave. I don't know why they don't stay where they belong instead of comin' out here and making trouble."

Still thinking about Cathie and that night, Dave said idly, "What are they doing to you?"

"Gamblin', for one thing."

"That's nothing new." Dave laughed. "Gunniston wouldn't be Gunniston and cowpokes wouldn't be happy if they couldn't lose their pay at dice or cards. You're not turning reformer in your old age, Hank?"

"It ain't the friendly kind of games we used to have, Dave. No, siree. These here sports play for blood. From what I hear, the ordinary citizen ain't got a chance. Everythin' stacked agin 'em. Marked cards, loaded dice, that kind of stuff."

"Well, they don't have to take it more than once," Dave pointed out. "If they know it, there's no law that makes them go back for the second shakedown, is there?"

"Nope, nothin' but human nature. Everybody thinks he's just a little smarter than the one who's trimmed him. That the next time'll be different. Party by the name of Lew Griffin is the worst of the lot. I'm just waitin' my chance to bring him in and run him out of town."

"Good luck," Dave murmured. "Guess I'll wander back to the hotel and put the feed bag on."

Gunniston hadn't changed much outwardly during his absence. The post office looked just as shabby. The movie house, halfway down Main Street, advertised the same double features. The same saloons were doing the same old brisk business. And the Town Hall, getting ready for the evening's festivities, had a couple of men on ladders putting bulbs into the sign that read:

DANCE TONIGHT

Dave went on to the Ace Hotel. Diagonally across from it, he saw a new place. He hadn't noticed it that afternoon when he had dropped off the Southern Pacific train that had brought him in from the coast. This place was a two-story stucco building that looked out of place in the sagging row of wooden buildings on either side of it. Across its façade was the name, "Lew Griffin," in crimson neon tubing.

There were curtains at the windows. Dave studied Gunniston's newest acquisition for a minute or two before he went on into the lobby of the hotel.

He stood on line later to buy a ticket for the dance. Old friends recognized him. He was kept busy shaking hands and wincing under the friendly clumps on the back. It was good to be home again. Big cities were all right, but he wouldn't trade them for the sleepy little cow town that had always been his home.

Inside the Town Hall, festooned and decorated for the occasion, a cowboy band on a raised platform made music for the throng dancing on the beeswaxed floor. They had even rigged up a battery of colored lights so that one minute the floor was bathed in bright-orange colors and then in green, purple and red.

On either side were long refreshment counters covered with white tablecloths, holding mountains of sandwiches and homemade cakes as well as soft drinks. Dave hadn't taken more than four steps into the place when Madge Crosby caught his arm.

"Dave! I thought you'd changed your mind. Twenty minutes and not a sign of you!"

She wore a pale-green dress, cool as a mint patch. She had done something to her hair so that it was piled in gentle curls on top of her head. It, somehow, gave her the look of a little woman, accenting the note of maturity Dave had been so aware of that afternoon. Her slender feet in silver slippers didn't seem real. Dave stared. He still couldn't get over the miracle that three years had wrought.

"Where's Cathie?" There was a husky note in his voice.

"Stand here. She's out there, dancing. You'll see her when the lights change. Way over toward the end of the floor!"

He did, the next minute.

Cathie, dark, sleek and lovely. Cathie in yellow, a perfect foil for her brunette beauty. She was with a good-looking man, smiling up into his face. Dave couldn't place her partner. He turned to ask Madge, but at that moment Madge had danced off with someone and he was alone.

Finally, the fiddles stopped. The accordion ran a mellow scale, ending on a high, sustained note. A drum thumped and a cymbal crashed. And the next minute Dave had made his way through the crowd to Cathie.

"Dave!"

Her surprise was real. The voice he had heard so often in his dreams filled his ears again. He saw delicate color rise to her smooth, golden cheeks. Quickly, her dark eyes turned from Dave to the man she had danced with.

"Cathie! I . . . I saw Madge this afternoon. We kept it a secret. We wanted to surprise you."

"I'll say you have!" She laughed, then remembering, "Dave, I want you to meet Mr. Griffin, Lew Griffin. Lew, this is David Hammel, my . . . my fiancé!"

Griffin held out his hand. Dave shook it, hardly aware he was there.

Faintly conscious that Cathie's companion was well-dressed, younger than he first had thought, but just as good-looking, Dave turned to the dark-haired girl as the music struck up again.

"This," he whispered, "is what I've been waiting for for three long years!"

They went out onto the floor. Colored lights rained down on them. In the kaleidoscope of color he held her close, as if he were afraid to open his arms and have her disappear.

After the dance, they went out onto the rear porch. Ponies along the hitching rail made sounds in the dark. The moon was just coming up, slender and bright.

Dave took Cathie in his arms. He closed his eyes when he kissed her. He told himself that this kiss, poignantly sweet, was worth all the hardships and the dangers he had faced.

"Dave! Don't be so intense!" She laughed under her breath. "We've got to go in there again. I'll be a sight."

"A beautiful one!"

"Dave, behave! Please—"

They danced again. Dave felt the unreality of the night grow more pronounced. Surely, he wasn't at Gunniston, in the Town Hall, dancing with Cathie Crosby! This was one of the mad dreams he had had. He wasn't there surrounded by wranglers, girls from the ranches. He wasn't listening to cowboy music, and Cathie was only a lovely vision!

Dave was brought back to earth when the second dance ended and they went off the floor. He saw Lew Griffin waiting for them at the exit. Cathie pressed Dave's hand.

"You mustn't expect all the dances, Dave," she whispered quickly. "You're home now. There'll be plenty more."

"Mine, I believe," Lew Griffin murmured, when the music struck up again.

He cut in smoothly between Dave and Cathie, deftly taking her back to the waxed floor. The maneuver was something like a puncher, on a roping horse, riding into a herd to remove one of the steers. Cathie smiled back at him over her shoulder. Then, the next minute, a soft hand closed around his fingers.

"Will I do?" Madge asked. She looked up at him when they were part of the swaying throng. "Well, how does it go? Was she very surprised? After all, Cathie doesn't show her emotions too plainly. You shouldn't have let Lew walk off with her like that."

"But he brought her," Dave said.

"Sure. Lew takes her everywhere. You owe him a big debt, Dave. I mean, the way he's been keeping Cathie entertained, keeping her from pining away for you."

Dave looked down into the delicately flushed face. Madge had a fixed little smile on her warm lips. It wasn't sardonic—it was too tremulous to be that.

"Sarcasm isn't becoming," he told her.

"I'm not sarcastic. Really, I'm not. I . . . I wouldn't say or do anything in the world to hurt you

Cathie was on her feet quickly. "You don't have to explain anything!" she cried. "Hank Warner did it for you. He did it when he came here a little while ago and arrested Lew!"

or Cathie. I guess I'm just a little peeved that she didn't stay with you." She added, "Even if Lew did bring her."

Griffin brought her, but Dave took Cathie home. They rode through the star-studded night in her station wagon. Cathie drove and Dave sat with his arm around her shoulders.

"When are we going to get married?" he asked her, his voice low and vibrant. "I've got to know so I can figure on what's to happen to the Diamond E."

"What do you mean?"

"If we stay in Gunniston, I'll open up again. Hank Warren tells me I can get stock from the Breeders' Association. There'll be a bigger demand for quarter horses than ever. It won't take long to get re-established."

"I don't like Gunniston." Cathie spoke without turning her face. "I'm sick of it. There must be other places in the world. Why do I have to stay here?"

"It's home!" Dave tightened the pressure of his arm on her shoulder. "After you've been away, you realize what that means."

"Exactly. You've been away, I haven't. That's the difference."

"Then—"

"Let's talk about it tomorrow," Cathie broke in abruptly. "I'm tired now and I know we can never get anywhere making plans."

"I want to do what you want," Dave told her.

She looked up at him for the first time. "You're sweet, Dave. And I guess I'm just loco."

They reached the Quarter Circle. Dave put the station wagon in the barn and borrowed Madge's flivver to get back to town. Madge's own escort, Buck Thayer of the Flying Arrow, was bringing her home.

Again Dave took Cathie in his arms. But this time, when he kissed her, she seemed to draw into herself. He could sense that. He told himself she was tired, that she hadn't got used to the idea of his being back, that everything was going to be all right.

Toward noon the next day, Sheriff Warner met Dave as he was leaving the Ace Hotel. Hank reached for his arm.

"C'mon over to the office. I want to talk to you."

The screen door slammed behind them. The sheriff pulled out a chair for Dave, dusted it off with a flick of his handkerchief. He pushed the big Stetson back on his head, bit off a fresh chew of tobacco and looked around for the brass cuspidor.

"Griffin?" Dave asked, while Hank's jaws went to work.

The sheriff nodded. "I didn't tell you the whole thing yesterday. I warned Lew Griffin. Official warnin'. Any more marked cards or loaded dice and I'd run him out of town. So now his game's supposed to be on the level."

"What's the complaint then?"

"Last night, after the Town Hall dance, Baldy Simmons stopped around at Griffin's for a little amusement. You remember Baldy—foreman over at the T-Bar-T. Baldy won himself two hundred dollars.

Nobody never did that before."

"What's the complaint?" Dave repeated, curiously this time.

"He won it, but he didn't get home with it." Sheriff Warner stopped chewing. "As Baldy was unhitchin' his hoss, prior to mountin', somebody come up in the dark and whanged him on the back of the head. And when Baldy stopped seein' stars, the two hundred was gone!"

"Griffin?" Dave smiled thinly. "Either in person or he sent somebody out to do the job for him?"

"Sure. But what can I do with no proof? Baldy never got so much as a glimpse of the party who slugged him." Hank Warner tilted farther back in his chair. "You always was a smart hombre, Dave. I figgered, mebbe, you might have some ideas. Slippery cuss, Griffin. What's your notion?"

For a minute, Dave stared at the flies buzzing at the screen door. His mouth tightened and his eyes narrowed. So this was the type of person Cathie had been seeing a lot of lately. Dave remembered what Madge had said about Griffin supplying entertainment. Did Cathie know the type of man Lew Griffin was? And if she did, why did she accept his invitations?

Dave continued to watch the flies, but his mind semed to sharpen. All at once, an idea came to him without form, without substance. He let it develop slowly, building it up gradually. Hank had asked him if he had a notion. Well, he did have one—one that was beginning to rear up in his imagination like a stiff-legged mustang bucking out of a chute gate.

After a long pause, Dave met Warner's silent stare.

"I have got an idea," he began slowly. "Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't. But, at least, I think it's worth a try. Here's what it is."

Cathie's porch was cool and shaded against the glare of the Arizona sun. Bill, her Mex houseboy, brought out an ice-filled pitcher of lemonade. Cathie, in riding breeches and open-throated blouse, was a picture to Dave's eager gaze.

She had never looked lovelier. Her dark hair was like polished ebony and her gray eyes serene and untroubled. Searching her beautiful face, Dave saw that she had changed. Last night he hadn't thought so, but today he saw he was mistaken. She looked older, less the girl and more the woman. And there was a certain sophistication to her that was new to him.

"I can put some rum in it if you want." Cathie poured lemonade and handed him a glass.

"It isn't necessary." Dave touched his glass with hers. "Here's to us! To the new Diamond E!"

He saw something in Cathie's eyes, a retreating kind of look. He remembered how she had drawn into herself when he had kissed her good night. Maybe, he thought, she had changed inwardly, too. Maybe, he thought suddenly, the three years had changed her feelings toward him.

"I want to talk to you about Griffin," he began, almost abruptly.

"I thought we were going to discuss a future residence." Cathie drew her legs up under her on the porch swing.

"Griffin, first." There was a grim note in Dave's voice. "I've only been back a day, but I've been hearing things about him."

"Such as?"

"That he's a gambler. Not even a straight gambler!"

To his surprise, Cathie laughed. "You've been listening to Hank Warner. Warner's prejudiced because he hasn't been able to do anything, put Lew out of business. Gambler? So are some of our leading financiers. I believe our best citizens play cards occasionally, for stakes. What's the difference? Besides," Cathie went on, and her tone was defensive for the first time, "Lew has been nice to me. Kind and thoughtful. I like him and you ought to appreciate what he's done. After all, you've been away three years and that's a long time."

Dave finished the lemonade and put his glass back on the table. He saw he wasn't going to make much headway with the matter of Lew Griffin. He dropped it and asked:

"What about us?"

"You have your heart set on starting the Diamond E again, haven't you?" He didn't say anything and she continued, "I don't know, Dave. Really, I'm fed up with ranch life. With Gunniston, as I told you. This is your chance to break away, too. Sell the Diamond E—you can get a good price for it now—and make a start somewhere else."

"Where?"

"In the East. It's the kind of chance that won't come again. You're free now."

He looked at her soberly, studying every feature of her pretty face. Slowly, Dave's heart sank. In that moment, he told himself that she was giving him an ultimatum. If he loved her enough, he would do what she wanted. And did he? Were all his dreams, his hopes and anticipation false things? Had he let his imagination run away with his heart? Was the romantic ecstasy of yesterday a will-o'-the-wisp beckoning him across strange, new spaces?

When he left Cathie and loped the sheriff's mare across the range and separating the Quarter Circle from his own property, Dave went back over their conversation.

He pulled up at his shuttered ranchhouse and dismounted. On the top porch step he rolled a cigarette, trying to straighten out his thoughts. Try as he would, he couldn't find an answer to them or solve the conflict in his heart and mind.

It was almost dark when he decided to go back to the Ace Hotel. As he got up from the step Dave saw a familiar, dusty flivver coming down the lane. Madge Crosby shut off the engine and pulled on the brake.

"Telegram for you, Dave. Rusty Dean said you expected it and that you'd be at the Quarter Circle. He gave it to me to deliver."

She handed it to him. He noticed that her copper-colored hair was ar-

ranged differently from the previous night's coiffure. The woman had disappeared and the girl had come back. Dave read the message and shoved the telegram in his pocket.

"From a buddy of mine." He let his gaze meet Madge's. The smile on her warm lips seemed tremulous again. "Have a good time last night?"

"Wonderful."

"Sounds like Buck Thayer is a good escort." Deliberately, Dave asked, "You wouldn't be in love with him by any chance?"

She shook her head. "Not with Buck."

"Oh, somebody else?"

"Yes, but don't let's talk about it. It . . . it's kind of a private affair. And now I've got to get moving. By the way"—Madge nodded toward the ranchhouse—"are you opening for business?"

"It hasn't been decided definitely."

The smile faded from her red mouth. The lids dropped a little over her gray eyes. For the second time since he had been with her, Dave saw that she resolutely checked something she was about to say.

"Well, I'll be running into you again," Madge murmured.

She started the car and left him frowning after her. Slowly, Dave mounted the mare and turned her head toward Gunniston. Oddly, all the way to town, instead of thinking about his own problem and Cathie, he discovered he was wondering who Madge was in love with and why it was such a private affair.

Two days later, nothing had been decided, no part of any decision arrived at. That night, Dave telephoned the Quarter Circle. There was a new double feature at the local picture house. But Cathie, it seemed, had a headache and asked him to make it another night.

Dave sat on the porch of the Ace Hotel after dinner. Activity was beginning to quicken along Main Street. Cars rolled in. Riders from the ranches, looking for amusement, cantered their ponies along the dusty thoroughfare. A crowd lined up at the movie theater's box office and across the street, through the dark, the red neon tubing on Lew Griffin's place penciled the gloom with the man's name.

It must have been two hours later when Dave heard a shot, then voices, loud and angry. He jumped up as a crowd began to collect in front of Griffin's place. A couple of deputies appeared and then, after a time, the tall, weathered figure of Sheriff Warner. He had a man handcuffed to him. He got him through the crowd, started him up the street. Another man followed, a stockily built young man in a gray business suit. A man who walked briskly, his hat in his hand.

Dave watched. The deputies disbursed the group on the sidewalk. The hotel clerk came back. Dave stopped him.

"What happened?"

"Plenty. Stranger in town, registered here this afternoon, stopped in at Griffin's to try his luck. Won himself nearly five hundred, so they said. He was leaving with it, going out the back door, when one of

Lew's boys tried to jump him. He wasn't quick enough. The stranger clipped him on the jaw and took his gun away after he fired a wild shot. Looks like Griffin's all washed up in this town! Hank was just waiting for something like this to happen!"

Ten minutes more elapsed before the sheriff's car pulled away from the curb in front of his office. Dave left the hotel porch. There was a garage at the end of the street, a place that boasted taxi service. He found a man on duty, but had to wait almost a half-hour before the taxi came back.

"Quarter Circle Ranch," Dave directed, and climbed into the ancient vehicle.

He sat tense and motionless while the car chugged through the moonlight. In a way, he dreaded what confronted him. Still, something else told him it had to be done and that he had taken the right way. At length, the taxi was past the first fencing of the Crosby property. Dave shoved a bill into the driver's hand.

"Never mind waiting."

The lights were on in the front parlor of the ranchhouse. But Dave didn't have to go in. When he reached the porch where he and Cathie had talked the other afternoon, he saw her in the glow reflected from the windows behind the swing. She was sitting there, her dark head bent forward, not moving.

"Cathie!"

He spoke twice before she looked up.

"Oh, it's you!"

"I had to come out, to explain things." He started to say something else, but Cathie was on her feet quickly.

"You don't have to explain anything! Hank Warner did it for you. He did it when he came here a little while ago and arrested Lew!"

"So Griffin was here? You couldn't make a date with me, but—"

"Arrested Lew!" Cathie's voice was brittle. "He told him how you had framed him. You, getting your buddy to come on and win money at his place and—"

"Be highjacked for it!" Dave finished for her. "You had to be disillusioned, Cathie. The other night, one of Griffin's men did the same thing to Baldy Simmons. Hank asked me to help him and I thought of Ray—Ray Wilcox—in my outfit. He was coming to Gunniston anyway. Cathie, don't you see that Griffin—"

She swung around, and, in the window light, he saw the fury in her face.

"I hate you! Once I thought I was in love with you, but that was a long time ago. I got over it while you were away. I never would have married you—never! Lew's all I care about and now you've fixed it so I've lost him!"

Dave stared at her, at the tears that suddenly rolled down her cheeks. She threw herself down on the swing, burying her face in her hands. In the house, far away, somebody was whistling. Bill, probably, a gay Mexican tune. Dave

hardly heard it. He was conscious only of a queer relief that seemed to lift an invisible weight from his heart. Of sudden gladness, a strange, new happiness.

He turned and went down the steps.

At the end of the lane, Madge climbed down from the top rail of a calf corral. She dropped lightly, almost at his feet. In the faint starlight, she looked like a small boy in her jodhpurs.

"I thought I'd better stick around, that you'd be needing a lift back to town. The flivver's all ready and waiting. Right over here."

But Dave made no move to follow her. She took a step away, turned and came back to him. Wonderingly, Madge stared up at him.

Suddenly, Dave laughed, reached out and took her in his arms.

"Life's a funny thing, Madge, isn't it? I mean, yesterday I thought it was Cathie. Always Cathie. Now, tonight, here, I realize how wrong I was. I guess it's never been Cathie, just you all the time!"

"And I guess," Madge whispered, "it has been that way with me, too. Only I knew about it, for three years!"

He kissed her then and she clung to him while the stars seemed to draw closer.

"What about that private affair?" Dave asked finally.

Her hands touched his face, her fingers trailing down his cheeks while her laugh, low and joyous, rippled in the night.

"What about it?" Madge asked huskily. "You ought to know!"

THE END.

CHANGE OF WEATHER

There is a ripple on the water today,
On the water that has been frozen and still,
There is a haze along the sky, miles away,
And budded trees are stirring on the hill.

There is a ripple on the wild, high grass,
On the slopes and down across the draw,
That is growing, safe from snow on the pass,
Nourished by water, murmuring from the thaw.

LELA M. WILLHITE.

A GALA AFFAIR

by R. R. Meredith

AGNES TREADWAY had always hoped that one day the train to or from Los Angeles would get stuck in the vicinity of Panther Hole, and one day it did. She hoped also that there would be a famous movie star among the passengers, and there was.

His name was Tod MacTree, and he was the rage of the hour. If Agnes had wished for the moon and it was given to her she couldn't have been more pleased.

When the news reached her, Agnes was branding a calf in the corral behind her grandfather's Deerhorn ranch. Spud Perata, a Deerhorn rider who was bearer of the tidings, was amazed and somewhat disappointed at the lack of excitement with which the girl received the announcement.

"Well, that's interesting, Spud. How long will the *Flyer* be held up?"

"A couple of days at least. Seems that last night's cloudburst undermined the whole section of track along Lobo Flats."

"And the passengers have put up at the Frontier House?"

"Yessum. No other place."

Agnes released the calf, watched it scramble awkwardly to its feet, and shooed it out through the gate. Strange how calm she felt. But then, somehow, she had known that this was going to happen. No less than a thousand times had she dreamed about it.

From the moment she left the corral and walked up to the house it was as though she were enacting a part in a play that she had rehearsed to perfection.

She showered and did her bright hair carefully and put on a simple print dress. She would like to have taken the station wagon for her trip to Panther Hole, but the props of

her play called for a horse and wagon as the means of transportation.

So she had the wondering Spud hitch up the spring wagon, and set out on the fifteen-mile drive. It was late afternoon when she arrived.

The veranda of the Frontier House was jammed with people, all of them looking disgruntled. Anyone who ever had stayed at the Frontier could understand that. The hostelry, equipped to accommodate six guests at the most, had no modern conveniences.

Agnes found Bije Simpson, the Frontier's proprietor, standing behind his desk looking agitated and unhappy. He was surrounded by people who kept pounding questions at him that he couldn't answer.

The querulous little man's face lighted up at sight of Agnes. Relief and gratitude flooded into his eyes when she requested a private audience.

"Gramp," Agnes said when they were alone, "asked me to drive into town and invite some of the passengers out to the ranch. He knew you wouldn't be able to accommodate them all."

"Gramp said that?" Bije stared at her in amazement. Then he laughed. "Oh, no! You're kidding. That old goat—"

"My grandfather," Agnes interrupted firmly, "realizes his civic duty as mayor of this town. The moment he heard of the accident he insisted that I drive into town and invite some of the passengers out to the ranch."

Bije scratched his head. That "civic duty" business impressed him. It sounded something like Gramp at that.

"Well, O.K.," he said. "How many can you take, Aggie?"

"Six," Agnes told him. "Five besides Mr. MacTree."

"Oh. Five besides Mr. MacTree. I see. Well, all right. You want to pick them out?"

"No. It doesn't matter who the other five are. I'll be waiting in the wagon."

The first act of the play ran along smoothly. The five passengers whom Bije selected, and Tod MacTree, were delighted to accept the mayor's invitation, especially when Bije mentioned that the Deerhorn had running water, bathrooms, electricity and other gadgets.

Tod MacTree sat beside Agnes on the seat of the spring wagon. He was even more handsome than the screen portrayed him. He asked her questions about herself, and she told him that Gramp was the only family she had. She implied that Gramp was an important figure in the community. She shook her head vigorously when MacTree asked if she were married.

She wasn't, she said, even engaged, which statement was her opinion and didn't jibe with the opinion of Shep Rakestraw, who lived over the hill on the A-21 ranch.

Tod MacTree laughed with such an intimate, relieved sound that Agnes blushed. She couldn't have felt more thrilled.

Exclamations of delight came from the passengers when they

wheeled in beneath the high arched gate of the Deerhorn. Not even lavish Hollywood could have duplicated the ranch for beauty. It was set in a grove of sycamores, with the smooth, green hills rolling away from it, and sharp mountain peaks etched against the far-distant skyline.

The ranchhouse was built of logs and was low and rambling, with two ells enclosing an open patio where there were flowers and green grass and comfortable chairs. All the outbuildings were also of log, built in keeping with the general architecture of the main house. The place was neat as a pin, homey, pleasant.

Three puzzled cowboys watched the spring wagon roll up to the patio. Emma Farnsworth, the ranch's buxom housekeeper, came from the kitchen and presented a bewildered and flabbergasted countenance to Agnes as the girl led her guests up the flagstone path that wound among the flower beds.

Quite calmly and matter-of-factly, Agnes explained who the guests were and why they were here. Emma opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Agnes said formally: "Thank you, Emma. You will show our guests to their rooms, please."

Emma, staggered, did as requested. Later, in the living room, her face flushed, she confronted Agnes.

"What kind of high-falutin' business is this? Wait'll Gramp gets home."

"Thank you, Emma. That will be all."

Agnes was quite aware of what was going to happen when Gramp got home, and she was prepared for it. She knew Gramp better than anyone. He was one of the chief characters in her dream play. She knew how to handle him.

Gramp came steaming up from the bunkhouse just before supper time. Agnes saw him coming, excused herself and met the old boy far enough from the patio so the guests couldn't hear their words. One look into Gramp's livid face and Agnes knew that Spud and the others had appraised him of the goings-on.

"What the hell is going on here, gal?" he boomed when he was still several paces away. "Spud says there's dudes here. Dudes eatin' my vi'tals an'—"

"Good evening, grandfather," said Agnes. "Yes, that's true. We have some guests. Six unfortunate passengers from the *Flyer* to whom we have offered the hospitality of our home."

Gramp's jaw sagged. He was a small man, thin, wiry, whitehaired, with bright blue eyes and a voice like a thunderclap. He was seventy-eight years old and looked fifty. Sixty years ago he had come into this territory with his young wife and built a home for himself. He'd fought Indians, drought and rustlers, floods and disease to make his cattle business prosper. And it had prospered, because Gramp was the type of man who couldn't be licked.

Gramp was worth a million dollars, but he belonged to the old school. He resented the encroach-

ment of civilization on his domain. He had no respect at all for men who didn't wear boots instead of shoes, for automobiles and airplanes, for anything at all that smacked of the civilization he so scorned.

For fifty years Gramp had been the most important figure in this valley. He'd been the sheriff and the tax collector and the arbitrator of all disputes. No resident for fifty miles in any direction considered making an important decision without first consulting Gramp.

Inevitably there came a fateful and tragic day for the old codger. He awoke one morning to realize his work was done. He was no longer the big shot he'd always considered himself. The Cattlemen's Association at Panther Hole had got together and decided to build a dam, and they'd done so without consulting Gramp.

Gramp was furious and indignant. He tried to fight the thing, to throw his influence against the dam project just to show folks he was still a big shot. But it didn't do any good. Changes were taking place all over the world, and those changes were at last affecting even this remote section. Two new generations had grown up since Gramp was an Indian fighter. New methods and new thinking were the order of the day. Gramp with his outmoded ideas was done.

It might have been a real tragedy, because Gramp was too proud to take it, but some of the old-timers in Panther Hole got together. They'd known Gramp in his youth and despite his blustering and lordly manner, they realized he was responsible for most of the good things that had happened in White Feather Valley. They knew also that being shoved on the shelf would kill him.

So they decided to elect Gramp mayor of Panther Hole. It was a position that carried a lot of prestige and not much authority. But it gave Gramp what he needed—a sense of importance. It saved him from ignominy and disgrace. It built up his ego. He still strutted around and considered himself the "terror of the West," and the citizens of Panther Hole and White Feather Valley good-naturedly, but solemnly, let him think so.

Agnes knew the score as far as Gramp went. She loved and adored the old man and was in turn loved and adored by him. She knew exactly what to say to bring Gramp around to her way of thinking. Or thought she did.

Right now, Gramp was fairly screaming his rage and indignation.

"I won't have it! You hear me? I won't have dudes cluttering up my ranch. It was bad enough letting you modernize the place. I ain't goin' to tolerate dudes. I ain't—"

"And naturally," Agnes interrupted placidly, "Bije agreed with me that, as mayor of the town, it was your civic duty to see that these poor people were accommodated. When I explained to them who you were they were all eager to meet the most important man in White Feather Valley."

"Huh?" said Gramp.

"They'd heard your name mentioned before in connection with

various important developments. They all consider themselves fortunate that they have this opportunity to shake the hand of one of America's famous pioneers."

Spud Perata and the other Deerhorn hands were astonished and not a little disappointed at the meek way in which Gramp accepted the situation. They had expected fireworks. Spud, in fact, was not convinced that fireworks weren't in the offing until, after supper, he sneaked up to the house under cover of darkness and looked around.

"Gramp's gone plumb soft," he reported to the wide-eyed bunkhouse gang. "Damned if he ain't sitting there talking to them dudes like he regarded them as human beings." A pall of gloom settled over the bunkhouse. Many of the Deerhorn hands were, like Gramp, old-timers. He was, or had been up to now, their only remaining link between a glamorous, adventurous past, and the dull, unexciting present.

The trouble was that these old-time cowboys, and Agnes, were inclined, like everyone else, to underestimate Gramp. When a man is figuratively put on the shelf, people become patronizing and tolerant toward him. His opinion no longer commands respect because it lacks authority.

Gramp had the wisdom of years. He was smart. His mind was as alert as it had been at thirty. And so, while pretending to follow along with Agnes' idea of the way he should act, he was quietly sizing up the situation.

It didn't take him long to reach a conclusion.

The next morning Gramp saddled his white gelding and rode over the hill to the neighboring A-21 ranch.

Shep Rakestraw saw Gramp coming and came out to meet him.

"Hiya, Gramp. What's cooking?"

"I am," said Gramp testily.

Shep grinned broadly. He was a homely kid, freckled, sandy-haired, with wide-spaced, good-natured eyes. He and Gramp got along fine, because Shep had built his A-21 outfit up from scratch in much the same manner that Gramp had employed in the early days. Also, the boy had a genuine respect for the old man's opinion about the cattle business.

"Something the matter, Gramp?"

"Plenty." Gramp sat down on the lower of the two steps that led up to Shep's kitchen. "Aggie's gone and done it. She's got herself a dude. A danged sissified movie actor. Shep, it's up to you an' me to save the gal."

"Save her? From what?"

"From what?" Gramp squinted up at his young friend. "You a growed man, askin' that!" He took a deep breath. "I've seen this happen before. Girls at Aggie's age ain't responsible. You can't talk to 'em. They're got to be showed, and showed before it's too late." Briefly, Gramp told of the accident to the *Flyer* and the dudes that Agnes had brought home. "I seen right off what she was up to, so I played along. Best system when a gal goes haywire. Don't talk, act. You with me, boy?"

"Well, gosh, Gramp"—Shep's face was troubled and unhappy—"suppose Aggie doesn't want to be shown?"

"What Aggie wants ain't got nothing to do with it. She's in a daze. She's been hypnotized. She's sick, an' we gotta take care of her and be mighty smart how we do it. She'll be grateful in the end.

"Now lookit: Tomorrow we got a rodeo planned. I suggested it to throw Aggie off the track. She thinks I'm just being hospitable. MacTree has been bragging what a hell of a rider he is, so we're going to give him his chance."

Gramp's eyes narrowed cunningly.

"You know that outlaw bronco you bought last week? The one Aggie don't know about. He's a peaceable critter to look at. Suppose you fetch him over tomorrow? Give him to MacTree to ride. I'll arrange it."

"I don't know, Gramp." Shep hunkered down and began tracing idly in the dust with a stick. His tone wasn't enthusiastic. "It might have worked in the old days. Right now it seems kind of corny and mean."

"Corny! Mean! Why, dang it, son, this is still the West, ain't it? Aggie's still a Western girl, ain't she? And is it any meaner than that fancy pants stealing your girl from out under your nose?"

"My girl?" Shep's head jerked up. He stared at Gramp in wide-eyed innocence.

"Oh, don't hand me any of that stuff!" Gramp snorted. "You been in love with Aggie since you were kids. That's why you built up this ranch, ain't it? The A in your brand is for Aggie, ain't it? The 21 is for how old she's going to be when you ask her to marry you, ain't it?"

A slow red wave was spreading beneath the tan on Shep's cheeks. "Shucks!" He swallowed. "Does Aggie know that?"

"'Course she don't!" Gramp chortled. "Dang it, son, you gotta tell a girl them things. You can't leave 'em to guess."

"But how did you—"

Gramp rose and placed a paternal arm about the boy's shoulder. "Shep, I'm an old man. When you get to be near eighty you see a lot of things that escapes your notice when you're a kid. You string along with me, boy, an' you'll get what you want." He grinned. "We're having a party tonight. You're invited. Come over and take a look at what's going on. You'll see what I mean."

Shep showed up at Aggie's party that night and made quite a hit. He was wearing his newest pair of tight-fitting frontier pants, a purple silk shirt, a studded belt and yellow neck scarf. He couldn't understand why the dudes crowded around and stared at him. You'd think he was some kind of freak.

There were a couple of young girls in the party, good looking, too, who clung to him all evening and asked him a never-ending number of questions.

Once one of them inveigled him out into the patio and the way she acted you'd think she wanted him to

kiss her. And he'd been introduced to her less than two hours ago!

It made Shep sick. He went back into the house looking for Aggie. But Aggie wasn't anywhere around. Neither was Tod MacTree. Shep waited until eleven o'clock, but they didn't show up, so he started home. It was way past his bedtime, anyhow.

Shep lay in his bunk that night and brooded into the darkness. He had to admit that everything Gramp had told him about Aggie was true. She sure had changed. If you didn't know her right well, you might figure she was one of those dudes. And they way she goggled up at that MacTree jigger—

Shep blinked his eyes hard and tried to swallow the lump that had come up into his throat, and couldn't.

The sun was up when Shep woke the next morning. Angry at himself for over-sleeping, he whipped through his chores and then got himself some breakfast. All the time, however, the thought was nagging at the back of his mind that this was the day Gramp had planned the rodeo.

After he'd eaten and washed the dishes, he strolled down to the corral and folded his arms on the top rail and stared at the outlaw, Cactus. Cactus, coal-black save for a white star on his forehead, watched him a moment with pricked-forward ears, then turned indifferently away.

Outwardly, Cactus was as gentle a-looking cayuse as you'd want to see. Only a trained eye could guess at the powerhouse that lay beneath that glistening black coat.

"Maybe Gramp's right. Aggie's a Western girl underneath. She wouldn't have much respect for a jigger who couldn't stick to the back of a gentle-looking nag like that there bronc." And he thought: "I could get away with it fine. It would sure prove to Aggie that dudes were only skin deep."

He turned his brooding gaze toward the neat ranchhouse and the feed shed out back. The lump rose in his throat again. "I planted them flowers for her," his mind prodded at him. "I piped water down from the spring up on the slope. I put shutters on the window and fixed things up the way I figured she'd like them. I thought she'd notice." He swallowed hard, remembering Gramp's words: "Dang it, son, you gotta tell a girl them things. You can't leave 'em guess."

Shep smote the corral rail with his fist. "Sure, you gotta tell 'em! You gotta hand them things on a silver platter and wait on 'em hand and foot, and beg 'em to take notice of what a fool you are. Well, the way I look at it, that's too dang one-sided. It isn't love, not the kind of love I want. If Aggie wants that danged dude, she's going to have her chance, and Gramp isn't going to interfere."

Shep's face set in grim lines. He took a rope down from a corral post and trudged into the lower pasture where a half dozen horses were grazing. He roped out two of them. One was coal-black, as black as Cactus, save for the white star on the latter's forehead.

Shep led the black horse up to the feed house. He rummaged around inside and found a can of white paint and a brush. He painted a tiny white star on the black horse's forehead.

The rodeo which Agnes and Gramp sponsored for their dude guests was a gala affair. Half a hundred people from surrounding ranches were invited and they all came, the young bucks eager for the prize money that Gramp was offering.

The old man was in the patio talking importantly to some of the judges he had appointed when Shep trotted up on the buckskin.

"Hiya, Shep. You bring along that horse for Mister MacTree to ride?"

Shep nodded and waved his arm toward the distant corral. Gramp squinted and saw the black with the white marking on its forehead.

"Good enough." The old man winked surreptitiously. "Looks like a right gentle critter. Now, boy, you run along and find Aggie. Leave the rest to me."

Shep found Aggie, all right, but it didn't make him any happier. She was sitting in a hammock with Tod MacTree on the south side of the house, and the way she acted when Shep hove into sight didn't give the boy the impression that he was particularly welcome.

Shep made a great hit that night at Aggie's party in a purple silk shirt and studded belt.

"Good morning, Shep." Aggie's voice was cool and distant. "Susan is looking for you."

"Who?"

"Susan. Miss Lambert. There she is now."

Shep turned and saw the girl who had acted like she wanted to be kissed waving at him. He winced.

"Aggie," he began, turning back to the girl of his dreams, "if I could

see you alone for a minute—" He stopped.

Tod MacTree was grinning at him in a patronizing sort of way, and Aggie—Aggie was acting as though he'd insulted her.

MacTree said: "Run along, bub. We're busy."

Shep could feel the hot blood rushing into his cheeks. He took a step forward. Aggie stood up.

"Shep, must you be a bore?"

Shep didn't know what a bore was, but there was no mistaking the look on Aggie's face. He slunk away from there like a whipped dog.

He saw the blond girl coming toward him, ducked around a corner of the house, skirted the patio and reached the bunkhouse unchallenged.

Spud Perata regarded him curiously.

"What's the matter, Shep? You sick?"

"Never felt better," said Shep. He gulped. "How about some poker? Bronc bustin' contests don't start for a couple of hours."

Up at the ranchhouse, Gramp was listening intently to a Mexican boy whom he had sent to "sponge off Shep's Cactus horse an' make him look fancy."

"You sure about that, son? It washed off?"

The boy nodded vigorously. "It wasn't nothin' but paint. Not even dry. Soon's I put the sponge on it, that white star just up an' disappeared."

Gramp reached in his pocket and extracted a five-dollar bill.

"Son, Shep's got a horse that looks exactly like that black down in the corral. Only this horse has got a white marking that won't wash off. I want that horse here before the show starts."

By noon the last of the guests and contestants had arrived. A huge picnic lunch was served on improvised tables set up in the sycamore grove.

Shep, who ordinarily would have enjoyed the sociability of such an occasion, pretended that he preferred the company of Gramp's old time cowhands at the poker table in the bunkhouse. He lost eight dollars.

At one-thirty the rodeo events began. Even the old-timers couldn't resist that. Anything that had to do with horses drew them like a magnet. Shep trailed along because there was nothing else to do.

When it came time for the stunt riding, someone called out Shep's name, others took up the cry. Shep had a reputation for horsemanship, and now he realized he was cornered.

He slid down off the corral fence and stepped into the saddle of the horse one of the cowboy's had led up. The roar of the crowd was in his ears when he rode out into the center of the ring. Ordinarily, he would have felt swell, but today his heart wasn't in it.

He missed picking up the lady's handkerchief at the very first run. And later, when he pulled his top act of passing under the horse's belly at a dead run, he almost

slipped. He did, in fact, give his head a nasty crack on the ground.

When he finally got through and headed back to the starting point there was only a scattering of handclaps. Shep felt lower than the under side of a stone.

The cowboys' end of the rodeo ended with a bulldogging contest in which Spud Perata won top honors. Then the dudes took over.

Tod MacTree participated in none of the events until it came time for the dudes' bronco busting contest. Then amid loud cheering and handclapping, the movie actor swaggered out into the ring. Watching him, listening to the applause, Shep almost wished he had not been fool enough to spike Gramp's plan. A fool, that's what he was. Why, dammit, any guy who would let a conceited dude steal his girl—

Shep's mind suddenly went blank. His jaw dropped about a foot and stayed there. He stared at the horse that Spud Perata was leading up for MacTree to ride. It was a black with a white star on its forehead. It was— Great horned toads! It was Cactus!

Shep swallowed. He gulped. He tried to yell, but the only sound that came out was a croaking gasp that was lost amid the cheering.

Someone touched Shep on the arm. He turned. Gramp's bright blue eyes were glaring at him.

"Gramp! For gosh's sake! Do something! I mean, that isn't suppose to be Cac— I mean— Oh Lord! What'll Aggie think of me for doing this?"

"Probably," Gramp snapped, "she'll think like me, that you're a soft-bellied, thin-skinned idiot."

What happened within the next few seconds was inevitable. The broncs that had been selected for the dudes to ride were, by comparison to the animals the cowboys had tackled, a bunch of plugs. Tod MacTree thought that he was getting aboard a plug. One quarter of a second later he changed his mind. In fact, he wasn't even aboard.

He landed flat on his face, skidded a couple of feet, and lay still. The enraged Cactus bucked around the ring a couple of times, then suddenly spied the prone figure of Tod MacTree and charged.

The crowd, which had been holding its breath, now gasped in horror. For the most part they were stunned. They hadn't expected anything like this. It took a moment before they fully grasped what had happened.

Except for one. There was one present, besides Gramp, who knew exactly what was going on. Shep. Before the startled eyes of the spectators, Shep darted out into the ring. He seized the trailing reins of the outlaw bronc just as it reared to smash downward with its sharp forehoofs.

Shep threw his weight on the reins. The animal's head was jerked around. It squealed in fury and rage. It swung its body, trying to get a purchase with its hind feet, and pitched sideways. One of its forefeet flayed out and struck Shep on the shoulder, beating him to the ground as though he was a feather.

Spud Perata, Gramp and a half

dozen other Deerhorn hands came to their senses then. They rushed forward of one accord, rushed toward the enraged outlaw horse and the still, crumpled figure of Shep Rakestraw.

It was very quiet in the bunkhouse. Shep opened his eyes and stared for a long time at the ceiling before he knew where he was or remembered what had happened.

He started to lift his head, and a million sharp-pointed spears began jabbing into his left arm and shoulder. He looked down his nose and saw that the arm was bandaged and in a sling.

Distantly, he heard the sound of voices. Gramp's voice rose above the others. "I dunno where she is. I don't care. All right, go ahead then."

An automobile starter ground. A motor roared. Gears meshed. Tires sounded on gravel. Silence.

Shep looked at the ceiling again. The familiar lump was back in his throat. "She'll think I'm a heel. She'll hate me forever. Doggone, Gramp. I'll sell the place, that's what I'll do. I'll get out of here. I'll—"

The bunkhouse door opened. Footsteps approached the bunk, stopped.

"Shep."

Shep looked down his nose. "Hello, Aggie." He swallowed. "Sorry about MacTree. Was he hurt?"

"No. He . . . he's gone. They . . . he left ten minutes ago."

"Oh." Doggone! Now Aggie had lost the man she loved, and it was all his fault.

"Shep."

"Yeah."

"I brought some things." She held out a package. "I rode over to the A-21 and got them. You'll probably need them while you're here."

Shep didn't look at the package. He looked at Aggie. Her eyes were red. Shucks!

"Look, Aggie, maybe if I explained to MacTree—"

"Shep, while I was at the A-21, I . . . I sort of looked around. Gramp told me to. He said unless I was blind, I'd see things that . . . that were only for my eyes."

Shep stared. "Dang Gramp. He—"

"Gramp told me other things, too. About Cactus. About that star you painted—"

"Why, that double-crossing old—" Shep forgot himself and tried to sit up. He fell back with a groan. He closed his eyes. "Doggone!" he thought.

He felt something very close to his face. He opened his eyes. Agnes' mouth was about two inches away from his own. Her eyes were misty and warm and tender. He could smell the perfume from her hair. His heart began to thump.

"Why, shucks!" he thought. "If it didn't hurt so much to lift my head, I could kiss her."

He didn't have to.

THE END.

Birth numbers and the stars above reveal your fate in life and love.

by Shawn Arlow

JUNE - GEMINI - MERCURY - NUMBER 6

Some people call Gemini the triple I girl, the three I's standing for idealism, intelligence and integrity. And these qualities do mark the true Gemini-Number 6 lady. Rarely does she ever lack any one of them. She also has three S's—sympathy, sensitiveness and sincerity. There is no sham in her make-up. While she might have a dual nature, it is not two-faced, but the true positive and negative of the magnetic current which energizes her outstanding personality. In her double consciousness, she is true to the fundamental ego.

Thus she is constructive and not destructive to the cause of righteous life. True, there may be reason to criticize her in her own avenue of conduct when, apparently, she jumps the traces of conventional harness. But when one studies her motivation, there will be found a loyalty to sound principles which she never betrays. Only the husband of such a woman can appreciate that.

An outstanding Gemini woman of the world is Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. She typifies the magnetic Gemini. Those who have questioned her loyalty in the past, have had to admit their error. No woman has been truer to her ideals than this "queen" of China, who was born June 5, 1898.

Of course, she hates shackles. She could not be repressed as women of China have been for centuries. And no modern Gemini woman

of America can submit to restrictions that bound her grandmother's conduct. Even the pioneer Gemini women of the United States found freedom in that dual dream world of theirs, for that second consciousness was a cherished thing though kept secretly locked from Victorian snoopers. They had their phantom lovers in their own hearts. Their married happiness depended on how near their husbands were to that phantom entity.

The Gemini girl lives out of this world at times. In her dreams, her second nature can soar to heights far above the mundane plane of convention and propriety. This is not because she believes the primary world is wrong, but because there exists in her soul a flair for the ethereal. A bird doesn't desert the earth just because it can fly in the heavens. It was born with wings and, therefore, it is entitled to fly and enjoy the heights. Likewise does the Gemini girl have wings—yes, wings on her feet, given to her by her planet Mercury.

May the Gemini woman of America never repress her desire to soar if only in her dreams. Let that phantom lover far beyond the horizon embrace her and then let her return to the practical world, refreshed and animated. No husband need fear that she will not return. It is his duty to try and make the trip with her at least once in a while, for he can be her phantom lover if he can only understand.

It is no wonder she is kind to dumb animals. In fact, the more like a lost pup or kitten her husband is, the more she will comfort him. She cannot tolerate a growling beast, however.

She is quite curious. You can't fool her with synthetic gadgets or double-talk. Don't strain to pull the wool over her eyes, because she has X-ray vision. She can see through poses. No pretender in friendship, business or love can get her to sign on the dotted line. Those dots grow into bombshells which she tosses back with a vengeance. And if they hurt you, maybe she will be sorry, provided you have learned your lesson. Because she can forgive even though she never forgets.

Never question her word, if you would keep her friendship. She is proud of her integrity, and sensitive to any lack of trust. She is electric in movement and does not have to stop and gather her wits. It is foolish to try to talk her down, for when you are all through, one little retort will knock down your house of cards, with no chance for reconstruction. Ask her, never demand. The only blitzkreig she can accept is wholehearted expression of a true love for her.

Two things always distress her: impure mind and impure air. She must breathe clean atmosphere mentally and physically. Being by nature of the airy class, she cannot go into low places without being stifled. And by that same law of elevation, she boils more quickly than the earthy person. Take her to the mountaintop when you make love to her, not to some hidden valley.

It is not natural for the Gemini-

Number 6 girl to worry, but when she does, she is courting disaster because fear is her worst enemy. Sometimes, when she is confined for too long a period, she begins to fret just as a sensitive horse in a stable when not allowed to roam in the pasture. At such times she must escape, mentally at least. She needs more relaxation and vacation than most girls. And she can get more out of a change of scene. The husband of a Gemini wife should take her on a trip frequently, if only for a day or so. To try to discourage such a visit, only makes her ill through no fault of her own. No bird can stay caged day in and out. Even a canary shows beneficial effects if taken from the cage for just a few moments and given freedom of the room.

So it is with Gemini. Her dreams can help, of course, but still she must go in person to distant places to give herself true rest.

Her cleverness makes friends, but her sincerity holds them. She finds men more understanding than women, for the latter find it hard to dismiss jealousy. The Sagittarius woman understands her more easily than the others. Leo women also like her.

She is more popular than she sometimes thinks. Many women hesitate to praise her to her face because they fear she might think they are merely using flattery. But, unknown to her, they praise her at least for her efficiency and wisdom. Even the most jealous associate gives her that recognition, if for no other reason than to be with the crowd.

All in all, she is part angel and part mortal. Although she might not be as demonstrative as some wives and mothers, still her loved ones appreciate it more than her neighbors, for one has to be close to her to really know her. No photo or biography can do her justice. It is that personality which must be felt, and which can never be pictured. Some day, when scientists know as much about magnetic current as they do the electric current, an explanation might be given of the positive and negative forces of Gemini which make her different from all the other children of the zodiac. She is the only one with twin control. And the gentle number 6 which closes into itself like a mother embracing a child, indicates there is an inner treasure which only the Gemini can reveal. She lives within herself because she is not a single force. And the man who marries her must understand. He is really marrying two women in one and he should love both. He certainly is fortunate when both are revealed to him.

The Gemini girl, like the sun up there,
Is part of the world and part of the air.
She can bring warmth as well as fire
Depending on her mate's desire.
And when at times there comes the night
And Gemini shines not so bright,
Her rays of constancy will show
Tomorrow's dawn has lost no glow.

The GEMINI—NUMBER 6 MAN

The Gemini fellow has his head in the clouds and his feet on the

ground, but unlike the usual idealist, he can see with his feet and therefore he is practical when it pays to be practical.

His love of independence and his desire to fly high, sometimes carries him too far, but he is a stubborn creature that way, and when he has once made his bed, he will lie in it.

Every Gemini-Number 6 man has some of the enthusiasm and independence of a Patrick Henry and a Jefferson Davis. Both were Gemini rebels to the established government of the time, and both were loyal to what they thought was right even though Patrick Henry's cause won and Jefferson Davis' cause lost. At least, both were consistent and both true to themselves. This is typical of the Gemini.

True, the Gemini man may marry more than once and he knows in his heart he loved his first wife as well as he loves his second. It wasn't his fault that his taste changed, for the things that a Gemini likes at twenty he may not like at thirty. It is better, therefore, that he marry late in his twenties when he can blend his tastes into a composite which will last through life. If he does marry young, then let him make sure he is psychologically mated, and that the attraction is not one of biology alone. He must remember he is half man and half angel. He doesn't want to let one extreme sublimate the other, but find time and place to be a devil when he wants to, and a saint when he would.

He should not marry a hundred percent saint, either. His wife should understand his dual nature and take it upon herself to supply the red when the white gets monotonous. When a Gemini feels that he has to kick his heels, go places and do things, he will be happier and safer to take his wife on the trip as a companion. Too many wives have lost their Gemini husbands because they didn't adapt themselves to their moods.

Usually, the Gemini man is as quick as a tiger and versatile. He is not a man to be fooled by some womanly sleight of hand. He cannot be stood up unless for a good reason. Nine times out of ten, the girl who calls off her date with him to go out with another fellow, will find Gemini's instinct taking him to the same place the girl is going, and then the conflict comes. He is too lucky an individual to be double-crossed with impunity. Nature likes him and Lady Luck is his psychic companion. No girl who wants to keep her Gemini suitor should take chances, therefore.

He has a sense of humor which keeps his animation from running wild. Even in some vital moment he will suddenly smile and see a funny side. It is reported that after Patrick Henry made his great speech on "Give me liberty or give me death," he said to a friend, "I hope bachelors will not take that to apply to marriage."

He never really opens up his inner self to his closest friend, and seldom to his wife. But it is difficult for him to hide his feelings. A clever woman can know what is troubling him. She knows it is a longing to go places and she should

be ready with suggestions. While he is a good actor, still he gives away his meaning by the lack of natural spontaneity which comes over him when restless. The girl should not take this to mean that he is tiring of her. He will snap right back to his normal self the moment the monotony is broken. And he cannot be forced to sublimate this restlessness. If pressed to fight it, then sooner or later it will break out with double force and he will be worse than before. Such has been the cause of many divorces.

He receives impressions like a wax record, and he remembers them well. The Gemini memory is uncanny. When he walks up to a girl and tells her he met her seven years ago at Atlantic City, he is telling the truth, not trying a line. And he cannot understand it if the girl has no recollection. Sometimes this memory is bothersome, because he cannot forget the hurts of the years.

Frequently, he is too touchy for his own good. But that is a condition of all people of sensitiveness. He must remember that people are not willfully cruel, especially girls, for most times a woman snaps in self-defense or to protect her guard, not because she wants to hurt. She may love him very deeply, but she pretends aloofness for fear of being misunderstood. All he has to do is assure her that he really cares for her. For the Gemini man is too likely to give the impression that he is not serious about love.

He is not as happy-go-lucky as

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June Issue, 1945 Lariat of Love

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some people consider him. While he is more of an optimist than a pessimist, there are times when he gets down, very down, and then he needs a girl to encourage him and to help him restore his self-confidence. A sorrowful Gemini is, indeed, an unnatural creature. He gets everybody else down, too, due to his magnetism and power over other persons' feelings. He has a great responsibility in that way and he must always keep his leadership in mind. It was the magnetism of the man Patrick Henry as well as his words, that electrified America. Some lesser dynamo could not have done it.

An example of a modern Gemini man is Anthony Eden, born June 12, 1898. People are more impressed by his presence than his pictures. His photos do not reveal his vigor, but those who have heard him speak and looked into his eyes, understand why he is the man behind the throne on English independence. He gets less publicity than many other leaders, but he accomplishes more in the inner chambers.

The Gemini man is not an ordinary plugger. He needs stimulation in order to accomplish any task. Not that he is lazy, but his mind responds more readily when enthusiastic. At his office desk or factory bench he might feel tired out, but suddenly his wife telephones that she is having guests for dinner. Immediately, he is animated and completes a fine day's work, due to a change in routine of thought. He should have a hobby to keep him absorbed in something other than his work.

On a ranch he is happy. The birth of a colt or a cow is something different. He just can't become set in his ways. Tomorrow must always be another day. And even the woman he loves must vary her clothes or her hair-do. He is not the type of a husband to complain when his wife changes the furniture about.

All in all, he is the boy grown up, but still the boy of hope and enthusiasm and wondering what is on the moon. And even the boy who wants his mother to take him places, will always love her, because only his mind is restless, not his heart, and likewise the Gemini man's love for his sweetheart or wife will remain intact even if his dreams are soaring. Such is the condition of being born with wings.

The Gemini man with his white love and red
Must always be free and must never be led.
He's part of the world, but is mostly above,
And he will escape from a too earthy love.
And nothing will keep him tied down to a grind
Because he was born with a freedom of mind.
His wings are to fly with, and she who can soar
Is that kind of maiden that he will adore.

★ ★ ★

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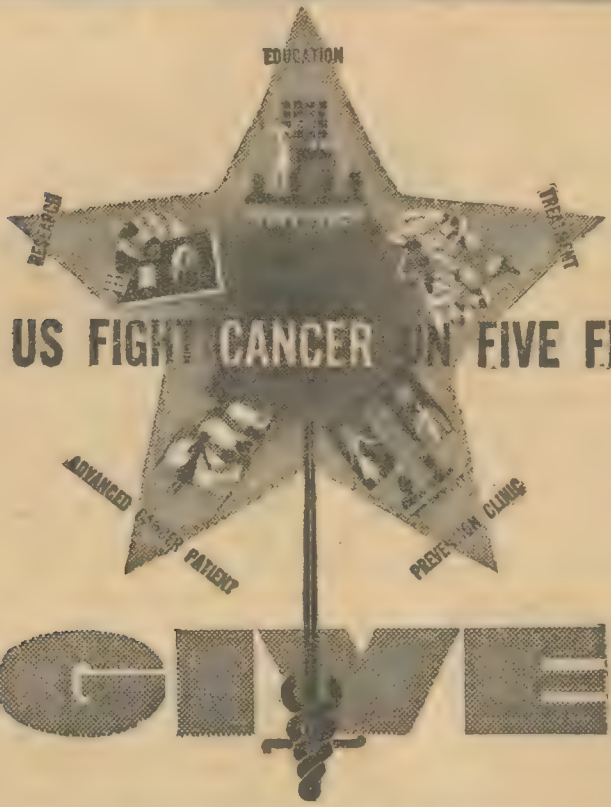

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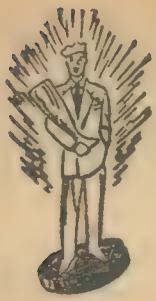
LET'S PLAY CHECKERS

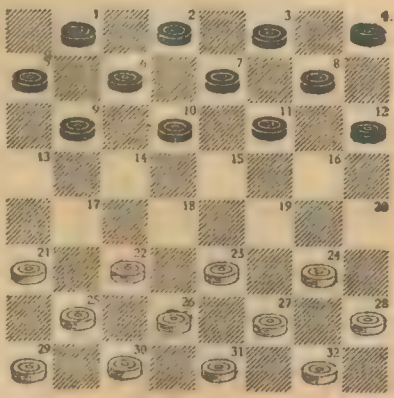


by Millard Hopper

World's Unrestricted Checker Champion

Millard Hopper is well known to the checker-playing world. He is the author of several books on the game and has given numerous exhibitions, sometimes playing as many as fifty opponents at one time. He is at present giving checker demonstrations at the various army camps and U. S. O. units, and has arranged with the editorial staff of Romantic Range to conduct a friendly checker department for the men in service as well as the folks at home.

DURING my appearance at the Mason General Hospital, one of the patients, a veteran of overseas combat, told me his trouble at checkers was in getting off to a good start. He knew most all the shots, traps, and other dodges used by the experts, but, somehow, always played a weak game after the first few moves. Most of his checker-playing had been learned in a small town in Kentucky. He played a strong natural game, but, as I had expected, relied on a homespun attack which would not stand up under the pressure of a standard opening offensive.



The Numbered Checkerboard

The standard openings are the preferred lines of attack at the start of a checker game. They have been selected only after having been studied and played for years by the leading masters of the game, and found to offer the strongest opposition.

The natural or "homespun" opening on the other hand, is more of an individual arrangement, favored by the player using it simply because he has employed it to good advantage against local players.

If you want to learn more about the best way to open a checker game, number your checkerboard as shown in the diagram, and make sure your Black checkers occupy squares 1 to 12, and Whites 21 to 32.

It takes the expert about three moves, or less, to find out what kind of player he is up against. If his opponent leads off with 9-13, he is quite certain he is a non-book player for 9-13 is recognized as the weakest opening move because it heads for the side of the board. All amateurs make a practice of this, when actually the moves down the center of the board are the strongest.

Against 9-13, White's best move is 22-18, taking control of the center.

Another player might lead off with Blacks by moving 9-14 and White might reply 22-18. Up to here the opening moves are on standard lines, but should Black move 14-17 on his next play, he definitely leaves the orthodox lines and weakens his game. Following 9-14, 22-18, Black's proper move is 5-9 and White's next move either 24-19 or 24-20, although a strong

"WITHOUT IT, HE'D BE DEAD RIGHT NOW!"

"One thing saved him. Plasma. So if he gets well, he has *you* to thank . . . Housewife Jones, Stevedore Smith, Sophomore Brown!"

And if he didn't get the plasma . . . if he didn't get well . . . would he have *you* to blame? You, who mean to go to the Red Cross blood bank, but never quite get around to it?

Don't give it a chance to happen. Go to your blood bank NOW . . . and win a soldier's undying gratitude—as well as —perhaps—his life!

THE RED CROSS NEEDS YOUR BLOOD *NOW!*

natural player might move 25-22, and later wonder why he has developed a weak game.

With Black, 11-15 is the most popular standard opening, but also must be properly met; for instance, White might reply 24-19, forming the "Second Double Corner" opening, but then make the mistake of jumping 27-20 instead of 24-19.

Black can open with 11-15 and White reply 22-18 which forms the "Single Corner," another popular opening with the experts, but if White rejumps 26-17 instead of 25-18, you can feel safe in assuming he is not a scientific player.

While these off-book moves are not necessarily losses, they are irregular lines and lead to a weak game. It's somewhat like the motorist in the country taking a rough side road instead of the main highway. He may get through all right, but he may run into many obstacles and possibly lose his way, while the car on the main highway has clear traveling with road signs for the driver to follow. My advice to the checker student is to select one or two standard openings and learn them well.

With Black's one of the best is the "Double Corner" and I am going to give you the proper continuation to follow.

You have played 9-14, and white has replied 22-18, now continue: 5-9, 24-19, 11-15, 18-11, 8-24, 28-19, 4-8, 25-22; 8-11, 22-18, 11-16, 29-25, 1-5, 25-22, 7-11, 27-24, 16-20, 32-28, 20-27, 31-24, 11-16, 19-15 (A), 10-19, 24-15, 16-19, 23-16, 12-19, 26-23, 19-26, 30-23, 3-7, 22-17, 7-10, 28-24. Drawn.

This game is well known to every checker expert and the student should follow it in his games. It's one of the main and safe highways on the Double Corner line. The student might say, "It only ends up in a draw game while I want to win," and while every expert is out to do just that, he, nevertheless, plays safe and waits for his opponent to go astray. For example, at the point marked (A) in the game, instead of 19-15, White might vary with 24-20, a natural looking move, but if he does Black replies with 3-7, and after the jumps White is in hot water. If he moves 22-17, then 9-13 wins; if 22-18, then 14-18 wins, and if 30-25, then 16-20, 18-15, 20-24, leads to a Black win.

In our next issue we will give our fans a good standard opening to adopt with the White checkers; meanwhile, try out that Double Corner on your opponents, and "good luck with your checker games."

★ ★ ★

If your magazine is late in reaching you, please realize that military supplies must, of course, take precedence over all civilian shipments. In war time, all transportation is uncertain and delays will occur.

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